AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE FIELD OF EUROPEAN INDEPENDENT PERFORMANCE*

Knut Ove ARNTZEN
knut.arntzen@uib.no
Professor, PhD
Theatre Studies Group
Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies
University of Bergen
Norway

ABSTRACT: In performance as a medium of communication, the question of context and conditions has been heightening. This contribution will focus on conditions in the direction of networking and internationalization. It was networking of a dynamic kind that promoted non-institutional art since the 1970s. It was a process taking place in Western Europe as well as in North America, and then spreading onwards. What happened during the 1980s had some predecessors rooted in the 1968 anarchistic movement, but then turned into new organisation, which replaced old ones and created brand new ones, like the Informal European Theatre Meeting (IETM) contesting the slightly ageing International Theatre Institute (ITI). It was also the coming of cultural factories, for instance the 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 bringing more notice to new areas and artistic directions. This was the result of some farsighted people's innovative way of working.

KEYWORDS: European Independent Performance, European Theatre Meeting (IETM), Trans Europe Halls (TEH), New Internationalism, Networking and New Art-centres.

NEW INTERNATIONALISM

The transition from the 20th century on to the 21st century is far away from beginning a pleasant journey, is the statement of Gavin Jantjes, the curator at the time of Høvikodden Arts Centre outside Oslo, while trying to tell us that the only way of getting to understand the changing values of globalization is to reconsider your own position. It requires an attitude towards otherness. Consequently, we are not able to get away from the fact that growth in cultural matters means difference (Jantjes, 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 a 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. Professor Nikos Papastergiadis at the Melbourne University has told us

“...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” (Papastergiadis, 1994).

So, different worlds are mixing towards a new hybrid state of affaires, which include debates on post colonialism 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”, Homi Bhabha stresses the cruciality of the performative role in cultural difference (Bhaba, 1993). Cultural energies are heading towards processing and translation, and not conservation and uniqueness. Bhaba attacks mainstream institutions in their repressment of the image of the other. This was the state of being when it comes to art intermedation until at least the 1970s. A black man in a white gallery would have been impossible to imagine. The black man belonged to a 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 mixtures in the understanding of anthropology and the arts.

Moreover, “art is a question of connections and disconnections”, as Nikos Papastergiadis has put it, and continued 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 unhomely condition, is what is most delicately avoided by the popular fascination with migration and cultural difference” (Papastergiadis, 1994).

These recognitions of a cultural understanding are based on a non-mainstream, non-axis bound position, as well as on the notion of the dissolution of centres. Post-mainstream is a possible concept to describe what happens when mainstream movements of experimental kinds are being exhausted, and mixes styles and traditions that were not possible to describe in a mainstream concept. 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 over the last 30 years.

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 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 from 1965 and onwards, when theatre people from USA, GB and other European countries came to his barn in Loenersloot, outside Amsterdam, which he had turned into an art gallery and a show place. 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 Britain also became a part of this networking development with the establishment of organisations such as the International Centre for Contemporary Art (ICA) at The Mall in London. Another offspring of this development was the Paradiso and de Melkweg cultural centres in Amsterdam, where international cultural venues grew forth with, among other initiatives, the Festival of Fools at de Melkweg.

This new networking, starting in the 1970s, also reflected new multidisciplinary trends in the arts, like the 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 composition, 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 classical-romantic tradition and even of the modern director’s theatre. Political movements in theatre and cabaret contributed to this development, which had created a crisis in institutional theatre in many European countries since 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 visual or plastic arts.

**FESTIVAL OF FOOLS TO INTERNATIONAL THEATRES**

The notion of Festival of Fools originated in the United States, then spread around northern Europe, like the Festival of Fools which has been in Copenhagen since the late 1970s. It consequently was leading into new ways of producing culture, like the network of Project Theatres in the 1980s, consisting of theatres like the Kaaitheater in Brussels, the Theater am Turm in Frankfurt and Hebbel Theater in Berlin. Kaaitheater was organized 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) Rosa and Jan Fabre. The main focus for both Mickery in Amsterdam and Kaaitheater in Brussels was international networking, and the catchwords to which Hugo de Greef worked, were “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, under the direction of Tom Stromberg since 1986, and Hebbel Theater in Berlin, under the direction of Nele Herteling since 1989, took similar positions. They became key organizations in the creation of a new euro aesthetics, as joint venture projects across national borders concentrated to northwestern Europe.

**THE INFORMAL EUROPEAN THEATRE MEETING AND TRANS EUROPE HALLS**

IETM started off as a club for friends of these ideas in 1981, and subsequently established a secretariat in Brussels. By 1991, they had 300 professional members, i.e. theatres, individuals and production organizations. Every year, they organise different conferences in different cities in Europe. The point is to discuss professional problems of intermediation as well as of promotion, alongside
theoretical workshops and showcases of theatre organized by the local representatives. In this way, different countries can present themselves, which culminated in the latter part of the 1990s, with more and more of the former eastern block countries having the possibility to present themselves. This was the case in April 2000 when an annual plenary meeting was held in Prague, and by early autumn 2000, it moved on to the Icelandic capital of Reykjavik where they focused on the relationship between science and art. The goals of the IETM to a large extent, reflects how informal networking is connected to new internationalism and understood as a transnational processes. At the core of the IETM to start with were the northwestern European project theatres and festivals, some of which were connected with the Trans Europe Halls as art-centres of multidisciplinary as well as multinational direction.

Trans Europe Halls (TEH) originated in 1994 from a similar movement, concretely traced back to the founding of the Cultural house of Halles de Schaerbeek in Brussel’s northern Schaerbeek-vincinity in 1984. Out of the same movement and inspiration came the Bloom and City Arts Centre in Dublin, the Kappelithas in Helsinki and Kulturhuset USF in Bergen, Norway, to mention some. This networking of theatres and cultural houses have largely inspired the Euro aesthetics movement and led to a co-operation in direction of both multidisciplinary and transnational movements in both a European and a global context. The Hong Kong Arts Centre could be mentioned alongside the Johannesburg Indian market area, where the famous Market theatre as well as the Dance Factory and a Music House are situated. Outside the latter, street children are having their own parties at night, with singing and dancing. I would also mention The Community Theatre Festival organised by the Market Theatre brings together community theatre groups not only from South Africa but also from other countries in Southern Africa.

The Trans Europe Hall network’s main purpose is to facilitate meetings of those active with cultural action in the field: directors, artistic planners, managers, technicians and administrative staff, and to discover their cultural environment: venues, event meetings with the themes and press, theme-based debates, urban context, etc., which was expressed in one of their information letters. The combination of different arts inside one art-centre could be further exemplified by organisations like the Kulturetage in Oldenburg, Germany, Huset (The House) in Århus, Denmark and the Podewil Centre for Art and Music in Berlin.
THE NEW ART-CENTRES OF A NON-INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTER

A general background lies in the situation of the 1960s. When it comes to art intermediation and education, this development is interestingly described in a book on performance in Canada by Clive Barker and Alain-Martin Richard: “To be an art student and to witness the social practices of both the academy and the marketplace did not avoidably encourage the prospects of an art career” (Barker and Richard, 1991).

This statement was further expanded on by the reflection, that relationships of artists to their professional institutions, like museums, galleries, art schools, funding agencies, etc., is a peculiar and unique entanglement. It resulted in a rush to try to replace traditional institutions with networking of an informal kind. In the 1970s, informal cooperation movements were widely spread, not only in Canada, but also in Britain and Germany. There was a focus on artists who wanted to stay in touch with each other by mail, travelling or by creating modest centres of activity. As it is put in Barker and Richard, “this made a lot of sense to artists living in isolation, including behind the – then – `Iron Curtain’” (Barker and Richard, 1991). Many artists, then, look to the alternative notion of networking centres for exhibition, production and distribution. There was a difference evolving between networking as practiced by institution and alternative networking with regard to social and experimental alternatives. This was connected to what would be referred to as a “utopian peak” at the end of the 1970s.

Artists wanting to experiment in this direction would look for inspiration among other places within the American Fluxus movement, connected to concept-like happenings and performance. Groups of artists would go for new directions in different informal art contexts, as happened in Canada in Vancouver and Halifax. In Vancouver, it would also be connected with the notion of cabaret. In the United States a gap would appear between two generations, those who would stick to a centrist conceptual art of a formalist kind, and the succeeding generation who worked on media aesthetics, like Laurie Anderson, Julia Heyward, and Michael Smith among others. This generation represented the basis for later experimentations in art and new technology.

The impact of the cabaret would reflect a dramaturgical tradition of a fragment-ed kind, which in many ways both would cover up for political activism, and a visual kind of dramaturgy that was represented by Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman in the US. New centres for production were needed and artistic
groups popped up from the Fluxus movement until cultural centres like Le Lieu and Obscure opened in the City of Québec, which were operated on collective basis. This is a vast development to map, and many similar constellations would be found all around what, at this time, would be referred to as the Western World, which attracted attention from behind the Iron Curtain as well as from some of the big cities in East Asia where a middle class audience had developed, like in Hong Kong and Singapore.

These new art centres are often related to collectivity and project based production. Theories of collective creation are very typical to late 20th Century with a strong impact on the 21st Century as well, rooted in avant-garde and post-avant-garde movements in postmodern theatre. It also corresponded to art as a social space, as expanded on by Raimonda Bitinaitė Širvinskienė in her article “Communicative Aspect in Theatre Art” (Širvinskienė, 2012).

SOME WORDS ABOUT THE CURATOR-CREATOR AND PRODUCER

This development is the background for the free enterprise of the curator, somebody who is hired from a museum or a gallery to organise an exhibition or do such work on a freelance basis. Famous are the curators of big events like Kassel Documenta or the Sao Paulo Biennale. Pontus Hultén, a Swede who directed Centre Pompidou in Paris for many years, was responsible for some of the big axis exhibitions like Paris-New York. The Belgian Jan Hoet, for instance, was responsible for the Documenta in 1992, himself coming from the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst in Ghent. He was the kind of curator with a background from the alternative networking generation, bringing his point of view into one of the most significant art events in the world. Another example of a curator in transition from project to project is Nigerian Okwui Enwezor, who was responsible for the Johannesburg Biennale in 1998, and the Kassel Documenta in 2002.

The curator, as well as the producer, in project-oriented theatres is a creator in a scientific, artistic and critical way. It is a person whose skills and knowledge about the international artistic scene will be able to take the responsibility for designing and organizing exhibitions. As far as he is not in a fixed position, he will work on a temporary or project oriented basis and go for new jobs after one is finished.
AS A CONCLUSION: GEOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES AND NEW ART-CENTRES

Another aspect of the question of art-centres and production houses in relationship to transnational processes is dealing with reflections on layers of geocultural perspectives. Artistic events in different countries are an approach to understanding geocultural dimensions. Geographical and climatic similarities can be related to society structures and political/historical differences and similarities. Why, for instance, is there an identity connected to the countries around the 60th latitude and what consequences does it have to know about it? The aboriginal situation, as a common denominator, can be mentioned, and one could exemplify, by questions connected to Scandinavia as well as Canada, and see what artistic reflections on positions in independent performance art can be raised.

This is also a question of understanding artistic landscapes as a cultural reflection based on defining cultural situations and comparing them.
REFERENCES


**REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI:** Europinis nepriklausomas teatras, Europinio teatro susitikimas, ,,Trans Europe Halles“, naujas tarptautiškumas, tinklaveika, naujieji meno centrai.