

## MANUAL FOR THE CURATORS

This text is an attempt to translate a number of arguments from a discussion held in November-December 2010, on the distribution of contemporary dance, theater and performance – programming, producing and presenting – into a manual.

We, undersigned here, speak from the position of artists and spectators, who haven't had the experience of curating, and we admit being somewhat ignorant about all that this job entails.

Therefore, our observations and "imperatives" evolve from reconsidering the available models that we are familiar with toward a potentially different and transformative practice – one that we are striving for, because we are realistic and demand the impossible!

We can anticipate some reactions from you, like, "they are naïve, they don't know that this work is so complicated." Our choice was deliberate, to be straightforward and clear.

### I. PROFILE

Are we experiencing homogenization and saturation of the field contemporary dance and performance in Europe due to co-production models? Can venues and festivals still be profiled and distinguished from one another? Do they count on the stake their work has in shaping the performance world?

1. The program is a kind of identity card of a theater. It is very rare and probably not so legal to find more than ten people with the exact same ID. It shouldn't be different for theaters either. The first mission is to give your program a profile. You are presenting the art world and this art world is not homogeneous, so should be your season. We do not want to be citizens of a mediocracy.

2. There is nothing worse than a bookcase filled with bestsellers and rewarded novels. Stop looking for the consensual. You are the mediator between artists and spectators, you propose and they choose, but if you don't propose anything different from what your colleagues offer there is no choice at all. Don't be a coward, dare to make risky proposals. Trust the artists and trust the audience.

3. Create a season without headlining, stop inviting big names in order to drag more audience. The big names will find their way through with or without you. Start promoting less known artists, your role is to give them visibility. By doing this you will step out of the vagueness and affirm a clear position. We ask artists to have convictions, what is yours (it can't be homogeneity, right)?

4. Question yourself about the necessity of one or several festivals during the regular season. Is it simply to revitalize it? Is the fact of every theater having its own festival a reason enough for you to make your own, too? Is your festival *really* different from what you are already programming, why and how? Take the opportunity of the festival to differentiate yourself from the others and, most importantly, from what your season is already composed of. Don't make your festival the "best of" of the year's program. You aren't obliged to organize a festival.

5. Challenge your audience. Your departure should be that spectators are curious and have faith in what you are proposing. Don't build your program wondering what will please them because they are all different. You are not the ones who can judge if a work is accessible or not, why don't you try to delegate the spectator with this task for a change. Communicate with your audience.

6. As you are the stakeholder of the history of performance your preoccupations should not only be the financial matters. The responsibility you have been given isn't the one of a businessman but the one of an "art explorer". The biggest part of your work should be the research of artists. We are not asking you to renew your program in order to feed the Gargantuan appetite of your audience but more for the sake of art. The investment you put in your investigations will produce effects transcending the mere purpose of your theater's program. You have the power to shape the arts world.

## II DEFINE YOUR ROLE

Are you a producer, curator, presenter, mediator, activist with a political agenda, artist, or acollaborator?

What are your responsibilities within each role?

What exactly does it mean to be a curator? Or do you call yourself differently? Are you rather an activist, presenting work according to that what you fight for... Or are you a producer etc... In any case a well thought attitude has to be considered to define your position. The definition of your own position will of course help to develop a position towards the artist, her/his work and the audience...

What are you?

1. **Producer:** a producer devotes him/herself to the production of a work of art. It is clear that you have the responsibility to support the artist or collective. It is evident that you cannot escape this responsibility or hide away from it in the case the performance is difficult and received with little enthusiasm. You have to take your responsibility seriously and support and discuss with the artist. A discussion on the content and not only about financial matters. In being a producer it is important that finances always come on the second or third place. Content is the most important. Don't deny content and don't choose an artist only according to his or her name. The value of a name is in the end relative.
2. **Presenter:** Your function is to present an artist and his work to a larger public. This 'presenting' is an important task which should be always in discussion with the artist. The presentation of artistic work should not be focused on the convictions of the theatre place itself but on the artistic work as such. In this case, it is through the artistic works that theatre will develop an identity and not the other way around. Do not present artists in the

same way. That will create a homogeneous program notes, which in fact is not interesting for the audience, neither for the artist nor you. It flattens things out and it is as if everything is the same. The image is slowly taking over, eating up the text. An image does not tell everything. It only gives an expectation of something which will never be shown, unless it is a conscious choice. To be a presenter should not be an easy task? Make it yourself more difficult. Try out different formats, talk with the artist and don't admire that which is evident.

3. **Curator:** make sure it is not about shopping. Clearly the role of a curator is constructing an interesting program with some vision behind it. Constructing a program only with the biggest names for obtaining a prestigious name is really not needed. Don't make it about your own ego. The art world is not served with that, neither is the broader public. Dare to make radical choices. Don't follow your colleagues. More of the same is too much. But also be aware that it doesn't become a competition to find the most innovative artists. By definition they don't exist. Be more intelligent than that and develop a sustainable philosophy. Support artists, also more than one piece. Support, discuss. Talk about the work. Do not talk only about yourself.
4. **Artist:** An artist collaborating with other artists. In this case it is easy to slip into the role of a dramaturge. Be conscious of the fact that you chose people that are not necessarily interested in working with another artist. In fact interfering with what the artist does, should be well discussed by both sides. Only by doing this you can speak of an equal relationship. Beware of your power position that is naturally created ('you choose another artist'). In the relation artist-artist you have to know on both sides very well why you work together. Make sure that it is not only about enriching yourself through working with different artists and as a cause: different viewpoints etc. There should be a more profound philosophy underneath it.
5. **Mediator:** A mediator between the artist, the audience and the institution. Being a mediator is communicating. Good communication will enforce the understanding between the different parties. It is a very diplomatic role, where a good insight in the logics of each section is needed. Self-imposing is the worst thing you can do in this function. It is really about mediating between the artist, institution and audience and the responsibility to do this in a well-thought way.
6. **(Political) activist:** This will only happen if you have strong convictions and a need to act accordingly. It is a real engagement for an idea that you want to share and communicate, via your organization, with a broader audience. The most important thing to do is to dare to be radical enough. Again let it be about the content (where you stand for, where you want to act for) instead of making it about your ego.
7. **In general:** one could say that collaboration is important in all of the functions. It enriches the art world to collaborate with the artists and with your colleague-curators. In the end you are all collaborators. Of course one can also argue that some of the definitions overlap. You can be a producer and a presenter, but do it consciously and intentionally. In fact, whatever you call or define yourself: do it consciously and think well about your responsibilities.

### **III DEFINE YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS TASTE**

How important is to like the work you understand and decide to present? When is taste an obstacle and can it be contained when necessary? How to be engaged with a work despite personal dislike?

1. Expand your vocabulary beyond like/dislike – we are not interested in what you like, we are interested in how the work is relevant for us as well as our fellow citizens.
2. Your taste is valuable if it inspires thought but it doesn't suffice to understand the work.
3. Is your individual interest also the interest of the community?
4. Learn how to argue for and against your tastes/choices – be aware of all the movements your tastes/choices could provoke and be able to argue (against) them.
5. Distinguish between your emotional attachment and objective judgment.
6. Are you more drawn to subjects relating to a "cause", or to an "effect" they have?
7. Provide audiences with contexts (with space) that triggers and supports thought – all for the greater good of engaging in discourse.
8. Support discourse.

### **IV HOW TO SEARCH FOR ARTISTS**

1. Give priority to the unknown rather than to the known. Artists with established reputations won't have any problems to find support. Make your choices considering what is at stake in the work and not according to the artist's name. Your search of the artist should not be motivated by its profitability.

2. The search of the artist has nothing to do with hunting a trophy. Do not look for the goose that lays golden eggs.

3. You have the responsibility to support young artists. Give them the opportunity to confront themselves with an audience and don't let them go moldy in neverending residencies.

4. More than a service given to the youth it is the opportunity to build an enduring relationship between you and the maker. This relation would be based on equality of both parties meaning no patronization of the young artist. If in the course of various works an artist traces a kind of pathway it is normal that the person who produces this work goes along with him or her. It means that you become more of a partner (yet not a dramaturg). Your investment shouldn't be limited to

a financial investment.

5. Before traveling all around the world, start your investigation within the local. Supporting the local includes an awareness about ecological issues but also the desire to build a closest possible relationship with the artist(s) you are supporting. The fact that the two protagonists belong to the same context allows more occasion for a concrete meeting to happen and therefore facilitates the communication. Do not fall into the trap of exoticism and work with what is already there.

6. We were talking about your investment in the research of artists but a lot of them come to you directly. You can't say yes to all of them but does it necessarily mean that you should forget about them? What doesn't interest you might be different for another curator. This is why you should sometimes work together, build a kind of service system useful for you as for the artists. The communication is not only limited to a dialogue between you and the artists. It has to be widened among people of your profession.

## **V HOW TO APPROACH THE WORK&ARTIST**

Can our encounters be about content and not only on the production side? Is it intimidating if I ask you what books you are reading at the moment?

1. When giving support to an artist, you are supposed to create the space to make it possible, not to narrow the artist to your expectations.
2. Mediate, don't patronize.
3. In the case of young artists you're not the next step on their school program.
4. When talking about presentation/distribution (advertising) discuss the content of the work and not only on the production side.
5. A deeper discussion of the content will lead to a better contextualization of the work, so the project will become more accessible and better received.

## **VI HOW TO PRESENT THE WORK**

We are concerned with how the audience is invited to this work – how it is announced, and marketed, whether it is part of another context or standing alone, whether artists are involved in creating the context around the work.

1. Don't use the program note for "marketing", it may seem to promise bringing more audience, but these audience members won't come back.
2. Improve the reception through lectures, debates and the after talks led by experts who narrow the subject.

Apart the above, well-known us, we have a few more suggestions:

3. Library/Reading room in the hall with some of the artist's sources used on the process.
4. Previews in the newspapers.
5. Press conferences/interviews.
6. All this can help to have an advertisement more directed towards the preparation of the audience, instead of making it attractive but not accessible.
7. The artist should be consulted in the case of a double bill program. The piece that could be seen before/after can affect considerably the reception of the work.
8. In the case there is not another option there should be enough time in between them, or a kind proposal in the middle to be able to “clean” the audience for the next performance."Ginger" between different pieces of sushi.
9. Respect the artist's decision in how specifically he or she wants to present and advertise her or his work.
10. Economize with images, and use images that are independent of the images of the product, for opening up the imagination instead of giving landmarks of the performance.

## **VII MATERIAL CONDITIONS**

We are curious about the economic base of programming. Is the proportion between various financing sources, public funds, and private sponsorship, changing in theater venues across Europe today? Are there other, usually small-scale, ways of raising money (auctions, friends of, the Robin Hood Fund?) What is it like to talk to politicians, and have to defend art as a public good that should also be a matter of public concern? How do programmers participate in creating cultural policy, how much are they actors, or dependent on bigger schemes?

1. It is important that finances are not the first reason to base your choices on. The financial director should follow you and not the other way around. Indeed in daily practice this is a complex issue. But whenever the financial director advises you to program the biggest names: refuse! Someone who studied economics is not necessarily a good art adviser! On the other hand do not regard him as an enemy. The best is to make clear distinctions between both domains in order that one isn't able to intervene with the other. It is clear that in this distinction the artwork should be prioritized. I would call it a healthy hierarchy.
2. Actively participate in finding money. Talk with the politicians and defend art as a matter of public concern and a public good! Taking politicians seriously by occupying yourself with them will be appreciated by them. But do not sell yourself! I repeat art is a public concern, this point should be clearly transferred to the politicians in an accessible language. The worst thing you can do is to leave it to your financial director or your co-director. The only one who knows the artistic program well is you! You made it, you thought it well over. Only you can articulate the pathway you want to follow with your

institution.

3. Due to changing times (crisis, movement of the west towards rightwing, conservative parties) it is also good to search for other ways to raise money. The ‘friends of’ formula where individuals can donate is a possible system although not sufficient enough. Cutting in expensive costs such as scene sets is a possible way but that can also bring the artists' independence in danger. In any way trying to foresee other ways of financing the institution always translate in small scale solutions. What one can also try is to start speculating on the financial markets, but in order to do that a very good economist is needed. Someone with an eye for the market. Private sponsorship could also be a solution, but the danger is that you are even more bounded to art lovers who want spectacle. It doesn't necessarily make you more independent, it can even make you more fragile. Indeed, it's difficult, but should something be done about it? Should we all do something about it?

### **VIII WHAT TO DO IN CASE OF POOR/BAD RECEPTION of what you regard good work**

Truth is more valuable than courteous words not to offend the artist.

Artist is not a fetish – don't worry about the aura of the artist.

1. Let's say that it became imperative for you curators and programers to insist in case of a bad reception.
2. There is no necessity to please your audience, and your “abonnés”.
3. There are other ways to be competitive for theaters and venues than just entertaining.
4. There is no sense for you to present work if it's not to improve anything.
5. What you miss is conviction.
6. A re-contextualization of work might certainly help the way an audience can re-view and reconsider the work they first rejected.
7. Less images and more texts.
8. There is need to more involve the audience before and after the performance, through different activities, for the sake of the comprehension.

### **IX HOW TO APPROACH THE SPECTATOR-**

1. Don't try to be cool.
2. You might need to reconsider what you are good at.
3. The amount of people in your theater or your exhibition does not necessarily means that you did a good job, you succeed.
4. Patronized, infantilized, or even colonized is often how an audience is treated.
5. It is high time to suppose that a spectator can think by himself.
6. If they choose to come it's also to be entertained, and it's also to discover, but it's first and foremost to emancipate them even more, and to learn how to develop a critical mind.
7. And if they (the audience) forgot this important reason of their coming, it is certainly the role and the function of a curator or a programmer to tackle this point.

## **X DOCUMENTATION/ARCHIVE**

Performance archives are so removed from the stage where the performance happens. They are locked up in theater institutes and reserved for scholarship. We lack museums in which all kinds of people interested in performance could meet.

1. Invest time in collecting documentation on the works you present and build an archive-in-process. This would create a platform of information accessible not only to professionals but also to all audiences (and it is precisely the “emancipated spectator” that will need this archive to satisfy her/his curiosity); it will also create a data-base that will, as time passes, contribute to history.

3. Instead of just posting the video as such, with the title of the piece and basic credits, it should come with as much information as possible. It should include: original and additional programme notes, press releases that were published in direct connection to the work (such as interviews with the maker, performers; reviews and critique). If during the process the maker (or performers) made notes, scores, drawings that are relevant to the creation of the work, those should be included, too, list other publications of, or about the author, and this work.

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