

*Dedicated to Rien,  
who is always so dedicated to others.*

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# ***1. The Community Arts Lab***



The original idea for setting up Vrede van Utrecht's Community Arts Lab came from Henk Scholten in the spring of 2005. Having recently moved from his position as director of Utrecht's municipal theatre to become the director of Vrede van Utrecht (Treaty of Utrecht), he joined a coach tour organised in May by community theatre group Stut that visited various community arts projects in the Overvecht, Ondiep and Zuilen areas of Utrecht. It was on this trip that he asked Rien Sprenger to develop the internationally focused community arts lab that is now known as CAL-Utrecht.

And who is Rien, you might ask? You can see him in the photo – he's the modest-looking fellow wearing glasses and a hi-viz jacket, helping to carrying the statue of Sint Maarten. For many years he directed the theatre and drama department at the Utrecht School of the Arts. Before that he worked in Nicaragua and he was the driving force behind multicultural theatre venue Rasa. Over the past 30 years he has sat on countless boards of cultural enterprises in Utrecht and elsewhere. He is a big-hearted, community-minded man with a relentless urge to connect and a heart for art in all its manifestations. He is of incalculable value to the cultural sector in our city and the province. I daren't use the past tense here, because Rien is simply unstoppable. That's the sort of man we're talking about. One of the first activities CAL-Utrecht's "midhusband" organised, in November 2005, was a three-day visit by the celebrated community-oriented theatre group Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD). It was to be the first step in an international search for inspiration for those operating in the community arts in Utrecht. Ever since, CAL-Utrecht has been well served by this dual focus on local immersion in Utrecht and the gathering of knowledge and expertise from elsewhere.

I was living on Aruba from June 2004 to June 2006, but just happened to be making a stop-off in the Netherlands in November 2005. Rien talked to me enthusiastically about LAPD and the plans for a major international event in November 2006. He asked if I would like to take part. My family and I were already planning our return to the Netherlands, so the timing was perfect. On 15 March 2006, I attended a meeting held by an advisory group charged with the task of setting up CAL-Utrecht's first international event.<sup>1</sup> By the summer of that year I was back and permanently settled at home in the Netherlands, and the process was gathering pace.

There was a constant buzz of activity at our office in the attic on Neude square, above what is now the Douwe Egberts café. The four-member project team comprised Rien, Jet Vos, Maria van Bakelen and myself. We mobilised our networks to help put together the strongest possible programme of events for the following November.

<sup>1</sup> The members of this "editorial board" were Jet Vos (HKU), Thera Jonker (HKU), Jan van Sas (Stut), Jan Sprengers (Dox), Saskia van de Ree (Yol), Jolanda Kamphuis (Zimihc), Marlies Juffermans (Zimihc), Simon Dove (Springdance) and Maria van Bakelen (Studio Maria P). Meinke Noordam, Nikkie Koper and Annemarie de Jong provided production support.

And from September onwards, I went out on the road with my video camera to capture the behind-the-scenes stories of several Dutch and Flemish community theatre groups. This signalled the tangible beginnings of the research and documentation work carried out by CAL-Utrecht.

The section of the programme open to the general public was titled *Art in my Backyard*, while the reflective symposium was *Whose Play is it Anyway?* Our aim was to present the broadest possible spectrum of community performance and to examine this practice in the context of shared ownership by participants and artists alike. And so it was that in the afternoon of Thursday 23 November, Rien and I stood at the entrance to Akademietheater on the Janskerkhof dressed in white lab coats, welcoming in our first visitors. François Matarasso kicked off proceedings with a perceptive and pointed talk in which he traced the contours of the worldwide community arts field, and explored its ethical dimensions. The days that followed saw panel discussions and seminars reflecting on methodologies, the assumed social value of community theatre, development-oriented art in the Third World, the rehabilitative potential of creativity in prisons, and creative partnerships between arts organisations and schools. At other times, usually in the evenings, we would visit Theater Kikker and the newly opened neighbourhood-based cultural centre Stefanus in Overvecht to see performances from Ecuador, Bosnia, Croatia, Italy and France, and from the Netherlands work from 5eKwartier, Fort van de Verbeelding, Yo! Opera, Le Grand Cru, Dox, Growing Up in Public, Stut, Rotterdams Wijktheater and BAF.

This was the first event we had organised, and even to us it was still sometimes unclear where the dividing line lay between ‘hardcore’ community theatre, art therapy for detainees, socially engaged performing arts, arts education and intercultural theatre for young people. But while this first Community Arts Lab festival left us with far more questions than answers, it did provide us with an expanded perspective on what could be defined as community arts – and we simply couldn’t wait to explore the subject further. The publication at around the same time of Sandra Trienekens’ *Kunst en Sociaal Engagement* (Art and social engagement, 2006) only confirmed this sense of urgency. Her book demonstrated that although the community arts field in the Netherlands was growing quickly, it was also fragmented and diffused. The result was that the details were being lost in the noise of increasingly emphatic demands for indisputable empirical evidence demonstrating the positive social effects of cultural participation.

Although as a man of letters with a more than average interest in the social role of art I understood these demands, I also had my reservations. My expertise lay in the area of documentation and interpretation of artistic processes and the social context of the art products that flowed from these processes. What most perturbed me about sociological research in this field was that I couldn’t see the wood for the statistical trees. These simply weren’t reflecting what the artists were doing on the ground, what forms their arts took, or their significance. The statistical approach gave the impression that it was of little importance precisely which artist you planted in the community – or what they did – just as long as art was being made at these locations, preferably with some small contribution from local people.

I strongly believed that the individual artist’s personality, artistic preferences and working method made a very real difference, and that if we wanted to gain a more thorough understanding of community arts it would be of crucial importance to document in detail these artists’ motivations and methods. And so it was that CAL-Utrecht prioritised a critical study of artists and their relationship with participants. We wanted to explore the reality behind the statistics and the success stories that community arts organisations used to justify their grants.

The chapters that follow are written in the first person, but this subjective voice represents the multiplicity of individuals and activities that have made CAL-Utrecht what it is today. The original editorial board dissolved after the first festival, but Rien Sprenger and I decided to continue together. We bolstered our team with Mira Kho, a cultural all-rounder with a proven track record at Rotterdam European Capital of Culture 2001, Roots & Routes, and Kosmopolis.<sup>2</sup> Mira urged us to use an upcoming symposium to explore the interface of care and the arts when working with children and young people in crisis. The resulting *Who Cares* conference took place on Thursday 20 September 2007 in the Rasa centre for world cultures. We coupled a second, public festival to this event in collaboration with Utrechtse Culturele Zondagen (Utrecht cultural Sundays), a popular monthly event sponsored by the city. In contrast to our first festival, for this occasion we worked in the local communities, closer to the people we wanted to reach. It featured one play by the Antwerp-based group Sering in a care facility in Zuilen, and another by Bright Richards in the asylum centre in the Oog in Al district of Utrecht. Both were combined with *iftar* meals. There were also performances by the Colombian actor Hector Aristizabal in the Oase community centre and by Playback Theatre from Grenada in the Kibra Hacha Antillean cultural centre. The young makers participating in the *Living With Differences* (*Leven met verschillen*) project presented previews of their work at Ondiep, Kwakel swimming pool, and Stefanus cultural centre. And at the close of the day, the first steps were made towards the creation of a true Utrecht community orchestra with children from North Utrecht, members of the Zuilen brass band, Tegenwind Street Orchestra, Fort van de Verbeelding and various musicians who had come in specially from Amsterdam.

I described the *Who Cares* conference as a “stormy encounter” in an article I wrote for the journal *Cogiscope* (Van Erven 2007). It all started pleasantly enough with an introductory ritual led by Hector Aristizabal. In next to no time he managed to bring a hundred or so strangers into contact with one another. After that the psychiatric health sector presented its specific language and approach, and then the artists from Grenada Playback Theatre introduced their playful dramatic idiom. These events took place in relative isolation from one another – as they did in the two subsequent workshops – and things seemed to be going pretty well. In the distance we could even see a bridge between the two worlds, because the telling of stories was a key activity in both practices. But any hope of developing a shared vocabulary was soon dashed when a tumultuous discussion at the end of the day saw seething psychiatrists and artists diametrically opposed to one another.

2 She combined the work of Vrede van Utrecht and Koers Nieuw West in Amsterdam, which she led together with Freek van Duijn.



The cause seemed primarily to lie in the difference in status between the two worlds. The professionals with a scientific background (psychotherapists, psychiatrists and psychologists) referenced bookshelves piled high with studies proving the validity of their approach. Creative therapists were much less able to do that and community artists not at all. Apparently, too little empirical research had been carried out in the Netherlands into the psychosocial effects of their work.

After eighteen months organising festivals and symposiums – which had swallowed up a great deal of our energy, financial resources and production capacity – we decided to split off those activities aimed at audiences, infrastructure and policy from CAL-Utrecht. Mira Kho took over that neighbourhood programme while we at CAL-Utrecht continued to pursue the research we considered essential. Our aim was to help provide community artists with arguments they could use to sway sceptical fellow artists and potential clients, and to support and advise them by observing their activities, by periodically reflecting with them on their work, and by sharing the knowledge and expertise we had accumulated on other projects.

*“Many people and organisations commissioning work would rather see smart-looking graphs presenting clear statistics they can interpret at a glance than critical outpourings.”*

We bit off more than we could chew in this first transitional phase into becoming what could truly be considered a laboratory. We believed that if we were to mean something to Utrecht while also saying something worthwhile about community arts, we needed to get to know as much as possible about activities going on elsewhere in the country. So we filmed plays by Boerenerfgoed in Limburg, at Adriaan Nette in Deventer, at a street performance by an Indian group in Delftshaven, and *Jalan Jalan* in East Amsterdam. We tried to use our website as a kind of community arts television channel. It featured work-in-progress film reports on *Opera Flats* (*Operaflat*) by Yo! Opera and *Living with Differences*, as well as conversations about working in prisons between Jos Zandvliet and his Chilean counterpart Ivan Iparraguirre. In December 2007 we had a live webcast with the Indian cultural theorist Rustom Bharucha, who commented on the artistic quality of the projects we had filmed. Working in collaboration with the Prince Claus Fund and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in March 2008 we funded a conference on theatre in prisons in Westville Medium B Correctional Centre near Durban in South Africa. We organised workshops with artists from the Free Street youth theatre group in Chicago and from Jana Sanskriti in India. And in collaboration with Cultuur-netwerk Nederland we created a national database for community arts projects. However, the limited financial resources available to us meant it was impossible to carry on working all over the country with the degree of careful attention required for this kind of work. “If there’s something’s going on, you need to be able to get there on your bike”, I’d often say in that period to convince myself and those around me that our core business really was in Utrecht. What we *had* demonstrated

was that there was a need for a national version of our little Community Arts Laboratory in Utrecht. And it was through the efforts of Rien Sprenger, Sikko Cleveringa and Ingrid Docter that just such a laboratory came into being at the end of 2009, by the name of CAL-XL.

The name CAL-Utrecht made our little organisation sound more impressive than it really was. I officially had just one day per week to work on it, and Rien Sprenger, who left in 2009, had barely a half-day. Fortunately, he decided to remain active in the background as an unsalaried adviser and we were lucky enough to find three remarkable trainees. The first was Margreet Bouwman, a 2007 visual arts graduate from Kampen who was pursuing an art education masters at Fontys Hogeschool in Tilburg. She carried out research for us into the differences in group dynamics and personal growth between a community theatre project and a participatory visual arts project. By comparing activities taking place as part of *Familie à la Turca* produced by Stut in Overvecht with those of Marij Nielen in the Lombok neighbourhood, she discovered, for example, that theatre has much more far-reaching impact on participants’ lives than the visual arts do. Nielen’s work, on the other hand, was better able to serve a far larger number of participants. Nielen’s art objects also confirmed their importance on a daily basis, because they were there for all to see in the local landscape, so there was no need to buy a ticket or go to a theatre to see them (Bouwman 2008).

After Margreet Bouwman had completed her studies, we were able to offer her a paid position and she is now chief project manager at CAL-Utrecht. In the intervening years, she has managed to hold together the community arts world in Utrecht by organising gatherings such as seminars, inspirational workshops – with international guests including Brent Blair and Hector Aristizabal – and a memorable retreat in Fort aan de Klop with François Matarasso in December 2008. She maintained a close bond with Marij Nielen throughout this time. From January to November 2010 Marij wrote a candid report on a troubled arts project in the Terweijde area of Culemborg (Nielen 2010). She used a diary format to record all manner of issues, both positive and frustrating, that she encountered when working with local residents on designing, shaping, engraving, and baking bricks for the repaving of a local square in a community wrought with tension. The result is a fascinating, impassioned and uncomfortable read. It’s just the sort of story that we at CAL-Utrecht are always on the lookout for, but that not everyone is as pleased to hear or pass on.

Many people and organisations commissioning work would rather see smart-looking graphs presenting clear statistics they can interpret at a glance than critical outpourings. To them, “research” equals “surveys and statistics”. Thanks to two other trainees and a daring challenge from the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) that we were simply unable to ignore, we improved our understanding of this approach and added nuance to our criticism of empirical criticism. Under our supervision, Margreet Zwart embarked on a study of the experiences of participants in a large-scale multidisciplinary project for young people at Humanitas Eindhoven (Zwart 2009). Having obtained her Master in Art Policy and Management, she went on to spend a year

conducting audience research at Stut Theater before returning to CAL-Utrecht. Working together with filmmaker Lotte de Man she has editorial responsibilities for the documentaries accompanying this book.

The person we learned most from about empirical research was Ivana Cerovečki. She holds a bachelor's degree in clinical psychology, and her mixed background in Croatia and Rotterdam informed an abiding interest in cultural identity and intercultural communication. Her thesis for the Master in Arts Policy and Management in Utrecht was drawn from research carried out on behalf of CAL-Utrecht into the responses of audience members from a variety of cultural backgrounds to community theatre. As well as her combination of charm and intercultural communication skills, Ivana Cerovečki deployed a number of empirical tools that we had not been exposed to in such close proximity before. They included keenly formulated survey questions, in-depth interviews, SPSS statistical analysis software, and the Chi-square test.<sup>3</sup> Her research demonstrated that Turkish and non-Turkish audience members differed significantly in their identification with characters in *Familie à la Turca* (Cerovečki 2009). Kees Vuyk and I decided that this research, combined with an earlier study by Linda Poelman relating to the same production, merited presentation to a peer review panel at the leading academic journal *Research in Drama Education*. The article we wrote together was accepted for publication (Cerovečki et al., 2010).

After graduating, Ivana Cerovečki spent a year with us carrying out a number of further empirical studies, including audience surveys at the first Spinozaplantsoen community festival in October 2009, and at the on-site performance *SITE (STEK)* by 5eKwartier in January 2010 (see Chapter 6). She also carried out qualitative research among participants in the youth theatre production *Flight (Vlucht)* in Maartensdijk and among secondary school pupils at Blauwkapel College participating in *Opera Flats 3* by Yo! in October 2009 (see Chapter 5). Cerovečki's work emboldened Margreet Zwart, Margreet Bouwman and myself to write an article for the *Jaarboek Actieve Cultuurparticipatie* (Active cultural participation yearbook) in which we critically examined this form of research (Bouwman et al. 2011). We had already taken our first steps along this path at our own Bewijs het Maar! (Prove it!) symposium on 1 April 2009 and at *The Next Step*, which we organised together with CAL-XL, Domein voor Kunstkritiek, Theater Instituut Nederland and the Boekman Foundation on 30 June 2010. Our statements at *The Next Step* prompted Andries van den Broek from the Netherlands Institute for Social Research to invite us to substantiate our criticism of empirical research in an article. An extensive search of the international literature led us to the conclusion that even highly experienced sociological researchers would find it impossible to demonstrate irrefutably that a positive personal or social effect was a direct consequence of exposure to community arts or other forms of cultural participation. Many studies, including those made in the Netherlands (and certainly our own), were simply too methodologically vulnerable or lacking in numbers of respondents

3 SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) is software used to derive statistics from the results of sociological surveys. The Chi-square test makes it possible to determine whether data from different groups are comparable or contain sufficient information to produce statistically significant results.

or frequency of assessment. As we wrote in the yearbook, to identify more effectively social or other effects directly related to actions in participatory art processes, “one must first establish what those processes are and how they came about” (ibid., 118).<sup>4</sup> That is precisely what we hope to achieve through this publication.

*“Viewed in this way, it is impossible to talk of the generic Moroccan, Turkish, Antillean or Dutch person as if they formed part of some unchanging mush of their assigned national identity.”*

### Theory Light

Over the following chapters, I will attempt to capture the essence of several community arts enterprises, together with the artists who were closely involved in them. Here, I would like to introduce a number of theoretical sources that I will be referring to throughout the book. Rustom Bharucha is a cultural theorist from Calcutta whom I first met in early 1986 and have been in contact with ever since. He first gained international prominence in the 1990s through his fierce criticism of the intercultural theatre of Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine. Bharucha accused them of Orientalism, the stereotypical reproduction of decontextualised Asiatic cultural elements (Bharucha 1991). More directly relevant to the field of community arts was his coining of the term “intraculturalism”. It provided much-needed nuance to often very loosely applied terms such “multiculturalism” and “interculturalism”. He explained in more detail what he meant when he was interviewed for our live broadcast on 14 December 2007:

Intraculturalism, simply put, is the study of the exchange of local and regional cultures within the framework of the nation. Those differences tend to be taken for granted ... Even if you only have Dutch participants and only scratch the surface a little bit you'd realise that they're Dutch in significantly different ways ... These differences are marked by ethnicity, class, gender, language; all kinds of constituents of culture (film transcription).

Viewed in this way, it is impossible to talk of the generic Moroccan, Turkish, Antillean or Dutch person as if they formed part of some unchanging mush of their assigned national identity. Bharucha notes a similar shortsightedness in the use of the term “community”, which denotes in many users' minds an undifferentiated homogenous group (Bharucha 2011, 370).

4 In this context, it is perhaps all too tempting to tag along with the media frenzy surrounding the suspension in 2011 of Dutch sociologist Diederik Stapel following the discovery that he had invented data for dozens of socio-psychological studies. It is clear that there is a great deal of room for methodological improvement in the social sciences, but we nonetheless still believe that the best approach is interdisciplinary collaboration between empiricists and arts academics, such as that which we attempted with Ivana Cerovečki in 2009 and 2010.

In other words, Bharucha is calling our attention to the importance of precise terminology, and of the danger of drawing superficial conclusions rooted in intellectual complacency. On a personal level, for example, he pointed out my own tendency to view statements from interviews with participants or participating artists in an art project as indisputable proof. In a recent article Bharucha cites the work of the American historian Joan Scott (1993) to explain that each individual piece of anecdotal evidence (expression through language) must be viewed as an interpretation of an experience and can never represent absolute truth. For this reason the many quotes I have included here, are intended to serve not as proof or as demonstrations of any absolute truth, but as subjective interpretations of an experience (Bharucha 2011, 377). And, I should add, the same applies to my own words that frame them.

*“Crehan highlights the conflicted position of community artists seeking recognition both within and beyond the art establishment as encapsulated by the aversion many people living in working-class neighbourhoods feel for the aesthetic and often abstract qualities taught at art academies, and their preference for popular culture.”*

The significance of a phenomenon becomes apparent through human interaction and can therefore never be definitive. This insight is also central to the way in which the American art historian Grant Kester views community arts. He sees the essence of this artistic practice as being the product of the interplay of artists, regular folk and the social context in which they work together. Kester believes that it is this bigger picture that should be assessed, rather than the physical art object produced or a snapshot in time of an artistic event. He describes community arts as “dialogical art” and is convinced that we need a new form of art criticism to enable its proper appreciation. Conventional critics are trained to interpret art forms created by individual geniuses, Kester believes, and they are therefore blind to the complex, long-term and collective interactions that community artists see as crucial to their work. As a consequence, community arts are wrongly dismissed by such commentators as “failed art” (2004, 10–11).

In a certain sense, this book and the accompanying short videos combine to form a response to Kester’s proposal to document the unique process of interaction over a period of time that community arts brings about in specific contexts. Kester advises researchers to analyse the dialogues and relationships taking place within a given project from as close as possible (ibid., 189). He recognises that the position of the community artist between participants and commissioning organisations is not always a comfortable one, and therefore recommends that they increase their knowledge of the broader political context in which they are operating and tone down their image as starry-eyed idealists (ibid., 135). The Korean-American art historian Miwon Kwon is even more outspoken than Kester when she advises community artists not to be too naive in their thinking about their work. In *One Place After Another* she positions community arts and the changing role of the artist in society in a continuous tradition of socially committed art in public space, a tradition that started in the 1960s. Kwon’s study is particularly valuable for the way in which it deromanticises key community arts terminology such as “empowerment” and “co-ownership”. She demonstrates that power relations within community arts are often anything but equal, that this practice may play into the hands of conservative politicians despite its apparent progressiveness, that these projects sometimes lead to greater social inclusion rather than cohesion, and that cultural participation by no means automatically leads to transforming participants into more active and more politically aware citizens (2004, 97).

Jan Cohen-Cruz, whom I mention frequently in the coming chapters, is significantly more optimistic than Kwon. She is attempting to increase respect for community arts by viewing it as a fundamental component of a broader “artistic continuum” (2010, 6). She sees the spectrum in which community art in all its forms operates as encompassing everything from primitive ritual to avant-garde socio-political engagement, and from participant-driven to professionally executed work. She believes that this art is not of lesser quality or universal value because people from lower social classes make a substantial contribution to it or because it seeks to trigger a social process in addition to the aesthetic component (2004, 82). Like Kester, Cohen-Cruz believes that conventional art criticism is overly focused on the technical virtuosity of artists and is therefore incapable of fathoming the less refined, hybrid collective genius of community arts (ibid., 109). For this reason she also advocates thorough documentation of the processes involved to allow for the assessment of the entire package rather than selected temporary highlights. “Documentation is crucial”, she writes, but so too is interim reflection involving researchers and artists operating on equal footing (ibid., 116–121). What distinguishes community art from mainstream art, she argues, “is not lack of technique, which many performances that fit engaged criteria display in abundance, but rather the artists’ actively committed relationship to the people most affected by their subject matter” (2010, 9). We at CAL-Utrecht have noticed that the relationship between community artist and researcher demands a similar level of engagement and commitment.



One particularly inspiring example of socially engaged community arts criticism is Kate Crehan's *Community Art: An Anthropological Perspective*, in which the author traces 40 years of British community arts, viewing it through the prism of the Free Form Arts Trust collective. Time and time again this organisation deployed continually changing models and funding strategies to make innovative and appealing art together with people outside the regular circuit. Crehan highlights the conflicted position of community artists seeking recognition both within and beyond the art establishment as encapsulated by the aversion many people living in working-class neighbourhoods feel for the aesthetic and often abstract qualities taught at art academies, and their preference for popular culture. Crehan describes how Martin Goodrich and his wife Barbara Wheeler-Early searched for, "an aesthetic language that both was acceptable to their trained artistic eyes and resonated with working-class people" (2011, 136). The techniques, organisational structures and mentality that they developed are also relevant to Dutch community artists. Take for example the decision of artists at Free Form to assign authorship to the collective rather than to individual artists – much as the anonymous sculptors working in cathedrals did in mediaeval times (ibid., 133).

In the following chapters I will try to give as complete an impression as possible of a selection of important community arts projects in Utrecht, Haarlem and Amsterdam. My sources include personal observations, video recordings of key moments, and interviews with participants and artists. As well as my own subjective voice there will be many interjections from artists. This is crucial because theirs is a voice sorely lacking in most empirical studies; because it will help to demonstrate how this highly context-sensitive branch of the arts can only be made by very remarkable people who are prepared to invest far more than only their craft; and because I want to create a dialogue between my perspective and theirs in order to achieve a more honest reflection of just how much is involved in making community arts. I have interwoven my critical analysis and references to theoretical sources with my attempts to identify specific methodologies deployed in the various artistic enterprises. I hope that this book and the five accompanying documentary shorts by Lotte de Man and Margreet Zwart will bring together insights, techniques and strategies that others will be able to use in practice.

To get the ball rolling, in chapter two we take a dive into the past for an alternative take on art history, in which I follow a remarkable common thread running from Silesia and New York City by way of London to the Netherlands. It is the story of Bread & Puppet, Welfare State International and Dogtroep, which reaches right into 2012 with the revamped Sint Maarten celebrations in Utrecht, in which Dan Fox and Peter de Boer are key players.

Chapter three consists of a dialogue between myself and Donna Risa, the artistic director of Stut, the oldest community theatre company in the Netherlands. Together, we look back to *Máxima's Coming!* (*Máxima Komt!*) Donna Risa's first play with adults, which she made with people living in Utrecht's Rivierenwijk district. It was part of the first Community Arts Lab art festival *Art in my Backyard* in 2006. The process leading up to it was our baptism of fire when it came to documentation.

Chapter four is devoted to a dialogue with Femke Janssen, who was responsible for a turbulent art project in the Geuzenveld district of Amsterdam, which we were allowed to follow. Her work took place during a period of intensive urban regeneration and it provides important insights into the sorts of things that artists may encounter when working in this kind of situation.

For chapter five we return to Utrecht and a critical examination of Yo! Opera's attempts to make community opera. I focus primarily on *Water, Pit (Kuil)* and two editions of *Opera Flats*, which saw a marked increase in participation from 2006 to 2010. Now that the Yo! organisation no longer exists, this chapter contains valuable information about this pioneering Utrecht-based artistic enterprise that on occasion succeeded in getting the entire city to sing.

In chapter six we conclude our journey in Haarlem, where *Story Kitchen (De Verhalen-keuken)* and *East Canteen (KantineOost)* combined to form the longest running community arts project of recent years, running from 2007 to the summer of 2013. Both were initiatives of 5eKwartier arts collective led by Titia Bouwmeester, who was the artistic director at Dogtroep from 1999 to 2003. She provides a candid and incisive assessment of her work in the eastern neighbourhoods of Haarlem and formulates convincing arguments in word and deed for the value of community arts here and elsewhere in the world.

## ***2. Sint Maarten's Secret***

**The community arts are no newcomers to the scene. In this chapter I reconstruct a remarkable tradition that started in Central Europe sometime in the 1950s. It then became intermingled with a wide range of folk cultures, avant-garde movements and geopolitical elements, spreading to New York City, London and Amsterdam, and from there all over the world, only to alight once more in the Netherlands in 2004. This is the story of Peter Schumann, John Fox and Sue Gill, their son Daniel, Warner van Wely, Jos Zandvliet, Peter de Boer and Ted van Leeuwen – and of Sint Maarten in Utrecht.**

### **Bread and puppets**

The story starts in Silesia, a region in southwest Poland that still to this day has a large German-speaking minority, where sculptor, dancer and musician Peter Schumann was born in 1934. In 1961 he left for New York with his wife Elka and two children. Although I never managed to discover exactly why he ended up there, the fact that he had apparently spent some time at a West German art school leads me to suspect that the appeal of the experimental and socially committed arts scene in and around Greenwich Village at the time had something to do with it. This was the time of the Beatniks and Happeners, of finding artistic inspiration in everyday life, and of experimenting with collective art processes and alternative forms of communal living in underprivileged backstreet districts of Manhattan and Brooklyn. They called their group Living Theatre with good reason: it was organised communally, it performed on the streets, and it sought to disrupt society.

In October 1963, Schumann and his friends Bruno Eckardt and Bob Ernstthal founded the Bread & Puppet Theatre at 148, Delancey Street on the Lower East Side of New York. Frenchman Christian Dupavillion explained that the American Bob Ernstthal had met Schumann when he was travelling around New England in a jeep and trailer performing puppet shows. Ernstthal decided to travel along with Schumann (Dupavillion 1978, 7). Bruno Eckardt, a German painter who had already worked with Schumann in Munich, and visited him in America, started hanging out with them too. That's the way things went back in the early 1960s, when many young middle-class people went looking for an alternative to capitalism and their parents' structured, bourgeois, risk-free existence (Roszak 1968; Van Erven 1988, 15–23).

Working in their house on Delancey Street this young artists' collective worked with local children to make thousands of masks and puppets. They came in all shapes and sizes, from small marionettes and hand-and-stick puppets, to giant ten-foot puppets based on German and Flemish Carnival traditions – these would later become Bread & Puppet's trademark. The techniques used by Schumann and his companions were simple, wrote Dupavillion: "the basic material was newspaper, or wrapping paper which is stronger, cut into strips, soaked in glue and applied to the clay mold" (1978, 7). At the end of each performance,

the puppeteers always handed out home-baked bread to the audience because they saw theatre as a basic human need. This tradition of combining food and art is perpetuated to this day by Bread & Puppet, and is reflected for comparable reasons in many contemporary community arts combinations of art and food.

As well as the tensions between the established order and all manner of emerging subcultures, the United States of the early 1960s was riven by the struggle for equal rights for all disadvantaged sections of society (women, Latinos, Native Americans, African Americans and homosexuals), and by the Vietnam War. From 1964 onwards these political upheavals began to permeate the work of Bread & Puppet. However, in contrast to many other radical theatre groups of this era,<sup>5</sup> Schumann's collective avoided the use of spoken language and concentrated on visual design, music and choreography.

I wrote in 1988 that, "Bread & Puppet conveys meaning beyond the contaminated channels of verbal communications", not realising that in the somewhat overblown sentences that followed I was contradicting myself: "The choreographed motions of the puppets speak to their audience in a semantics of images that are punctuated by a large variety of mainly percussion and wind instruments (the most primitive of musical instruments)" (Van Erven 1988, 62). I had interviewed Peter Schumann in 1983, and he had told me that while he had indeed lost faith in spoken language, partly in response to the idle promises of politicians, his decision to use non-verbal language in his work was primarily an artistic one: "I am a picture maker. In a picture you grasp something in a different way than in words. In a picture you grasp an idea in one instantaneous image. With words you grasp it through logic, through reason, and it's just a different process in the mind" (personal interview, Plainfield, Vermont, 28 December 1983).

In autumn 1965, Schumann made the legendary street performance *Fire*. It was a minimal, wordless and powerful tribute to three young Americans who had immolated themselves earlier that year in protest against the war in Vietnam. Five puppeteers played the roles of twenty Vietnamese women being burnt in their village by napalm. Their silent, motionless, and reproachful faces were enveloped in a huge red cloth.<sup>6</sup> Bread & Puppet toured *Fire* throughout Europe, including the Netherlands, where it left a profound impression on those who saw it. On the same tour Bread & Puppet also performed *A Man Says Goodbye to his Mother*.

5 In his speech at the opening of the new Formaat studio in Rotterdam on 11 January 2008, Augusto Boal recalled this form of theatre: "Many years ago, the political theatre of the '50s, of the '60s, of even the '70s, was a political theatre of messages. We ourselves thought that because we were artists, that we knew everything, that we had to tell people what to do. We knew everything about everything because we were artists. And our audience, because they were audience didn't know anything. That was a mistake that we made. [laughs] During the play we were bored to death, BUT there WAS a message and that message was good. Imposing ideas on the public like that was current at that time" (transcribed from video documentation of opening of Formaat).

6 In an article published in *Le Monde* on 26 April 1968, Nicole Zand wrote that "with extremely simple technical means – a rattle, a violin, a bare light bulb, a soup tureen and some masks – Peter Schumann actually manages, without any words, without attacking our consciences or feelings, to give us an illuminating vision of Vietnam. Suddenly we feel the 'reality' of the war, more than any ideological speeches, well meaning films or pictures of napalmed children could convey" (cited in Dupavillion 1978, 9).





Peter Schumann taking part in a Bread & Puppet pageant. Photo: Jack Sumberg, 2006.

John Fox, a young tutor at Bradford Art Academy, saw it one drizzly afternoon on a street corner of London in 1965.<sup>7</sup> Inspired by this experience, a couple of years later he founded Welfare State, a theatre company that in time would garner even greater fame than Bread & Puppet:

Simple, direct, monochromatic backdrops painted on white sheets depicted an Asian village. A narrator with a skull mask carried a bag of props. There was a trumpeter, also in a skull mask, and a mother in black with a silver-grey mask. The son marched to war to the time of a drum and was shot in the arm. The narrator replaced the mother's mask with that of an oriental woman... (Fox 2002, 9).

Almost 40 years later John Fox remains deeply affected by this powerful performance that lasted a mere five minutes. It climaxes with the Asian woman stabbing to death with scissors the young man who has destroyed her crop (symbolised by a pot plant) using Agent Orange (a cloth) and killed her child. Fox described how the performance ended with the son being carried away on the shoulders of the woman and the narrator, both wearing death masks.

Although the story of Bread & Puppet continued, I shall let it fade into the background here. On their return from Europe, the group was evicted from its Delancey Street home by the landlord. Bread & Puppet relocated to an old farm in Glover, Vermont, where the group still lives and works. The rolling landscape across from Height Road (Route 122) forms a perfect natural amphitheatre for spectacular summertime events such as the annual *Domestic Resurrection Circus*, which attracted audiences in their thousands in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> The company is still travelling around the world performing large-scale outdoor pageants and more intimate indoor shows, and giving workshops. The years have not tempered Bread & Puppet's political commitment, ecological activism and minimalist visual style. Fox expresses great respect for Peter Schumann in his memoirs: "Peter is a saint" (ibid., 10). Bread & Puppet's influence is evident in the aesthetics and spirit of Welfare State. Fox explains that the original name of the company, Welfare State ("International" was only added in the 1970s) recognised "participatory socialism, where art would be as available and accessible as free dentures, spectacles and coffins. Since then, we have swung between the poles of populist performance art and applied anthropology" (ibid., 3), words that could equally have been said about Bread & Puppet.

<sup>7</sup> This date is under some dispute. The University of Vermont's Special Collections website, which holds the archive material for Bread & Puppet, states that the group first toured Europe only in 1968 ([cdi.uvm.edu/findingaids/viewEAD.xql?pid=bredpup.ead.xml](http://cdi.uvm.edu/findingaids/viewEAD.xql?pid=bredpup.ead.xml)). However, Dupavillon (1978, 9) writes that *Fire* was performed in the US and in Europe from 1965 to 1968. The date given by Fox would support the latter claim.

<sup>8</sup> Following a fatal accident at the 1998 *Domestic Resurrection Circus* Bread & Puppet decided to stop holding this annual event.



## Welfare State International

It would serve little purpose to recapitulate the entire history of Welfare State International here. This has already been done more than adequately in *Eyes on Stalks*, John Fox's own candid book illustrated with beautiful drawings, and *Engineers of the Imagination*, the manual compiled by Tony Coult and Baz Kershaw. However, something that does warrant further examination is the way in which Welfare State International has sought throughout its career to seek a particular balance between social and artistic qualities. I believe that this is, in essence, the ultimate goal of all community arts.

As well as being inspired by Bread & Puppet's simple and tasteful aesthetics and philosophy, John Fox and his followers were driven by a desire to operate outside the art establishment,<sup>9</sup> and to merge art and everyday life. Fox cites Happenings, the Fluxus movement and artists such as Joseph Beuys, John Cage and Allan Kaprow as inspirations for his work, which was always expressive, ecological in character, and organically connected to its place of origin (ibid., 29). Wherever possible, the members of Welfare State would therefore live temporarily where they were working. For the first ten years of its existence, Welfare State was a travelling company trekking from project to project with a circus tent and caravans. Dan Fox, the son of John and his wife Sue Gill, still remembers it clearly:

My sister and I never went to a normal primary school. We had our own school in the company. We used to live in hotels, but as more and more members of the company got children that wasn't a conducive environment for kids. Then everybody bought a caravan. We had these big showman's caravans, really nice ones with big lorries to pull them. So when we would go to Europe we would go with all these caravans. Like a circus. We had a tent and would camp. We would be on the road for quite a long time, but we had a winter base which was in Lancashire (personal interview, Utrecht, 9 November 2012).

Welfare State's first pieces were small-scale, satirical, clownesque street performances, but with time the work became increasingly spectacular and surreal. The group gradually developed its own characteristic elements such as fireworks, ice sculptures, large moving sculptures, processions and rituals, percussion music, and links to cultural traditions. From 1978 onwards, then in its second decade, Welfare State became truly international, and the group started specialising in long-term residencies at major festivals. As well as helping their reputation to grow, these artistic interactions at home and abroad led to all manner of artistic discoveries. For example, on a six-month stay in Adelaide, Australia, in 1978, Fox encountered a technique for writing with fire which involved setting light to paraffin-soaked paper affixed in predetermined patterns to large metal frames.

9 Welfare State were by no means alone in this. Kate Crehan's *Community Art: An Anthropological Perspective* traces the history of the collective Free Form Arts, which was founded in 1969. "It emerged", she writes, "like so many other community arts organizations, from the trend in the 1960s to make art reach beyond the usual art world audiences, by making art *with* those excluded from high art" (2012, xi). The occupation by teachers and students of Hornsey Art College in 1968 was to play a crucial role in the development of community arts in Great Britain. This occupation was connected to a more general trend that was "the breaking down of barriers between previously discrete art-forms [which] was echoed in the active seeking by students of involvement in social and political activity" (Coult and Kershaw 1990, 6).

Another project, in 1982, inspired the large-scale lantern processions with which Welfare State International would later achieve huge success. After a problematic on-site production of *King Lear* at the Toga Theatre Festival 300 kilometres north of Tokyo, the group travelled for a short break to the north of Japan. Here they witnessed a ritual blessing of fishing boats with lanterns floating on the sea and huge, booming drums being carried down from the hills (Fox 2002, 76).

Other memorable interventions in these nomadic years took place at Toronto Festival of Theatre (1981), London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT, 1983), Vancouver Expo (1986) and in 1990 in Glasgow when it was the European Capital of Culture. The 1980s were also marked by a growing desire within the group to engage with a specific community for a number of years. After a difficult start, from 1983 to 1990 this led to a fruitful collaboration with the inhabitants of Barrow-in-Furness, a shipbuilding town in the northwest of England, where the largest employer by far was the Ministry of Defence.

*"It took four years to ingratiate ourselves again, because our street style and Mad Max costumes were too arty and too confrontational and the film's message was too outspoken and critical for a town dependent on building nuclear submarines."*

On the face of it, the conservative town of Barrow-in-Furness seemed ill suited to Welfare State's ideology. And indeed, the group's first intervention went very much against the local grain, involving as it did a controversial community film production entitled *King Real and the Hoodlums*. "It took four years to ingratiate ourselves again, because our street style and Mad Max costumes were too arty and too confrontational and the film's message was too outspoken and critical for a town dependent on building nuclear submarines" (ibid., 110).

Ultimately, however, the artists did manage to win over the local populace with a huge spectacle on 13 July 1987, marking the centenary of the local town hall. For this occasion, they made the six-hour-long *Town Hall Tattoo*, which took six months to prepare, involved hundreds of volunteers and attracted an audience of 15,000.<sup>10</sup>

The climax of *Town Hall Tattoo* was the scene in which a giant Queen Victoria seated on an elephant was hounded by a ten-foot tall puppet of the local mayor sitting astride an enormous bee atop a giant arrow (ibid., 111).<sup>11</sup> This epic battle ended with Queen Victoria's bloomers ("as big as a tennis court and [it] had taken us three days of sewing") being hoisted fifty metres up into the air like

10 The town had a population of 60,000 in 1987.

11 This surreal image is also a play on words: Bee (or the letter 'B') + "arrow" = "Barrow".

some flag of truce. This crowning moment was accompanied by a cacophony of fire engine sirens, garbage truck horns, music from local bands and choirs, the whizzing of members of the local climbing club sliding down ropes from nearby buildings, the loud clanging of church bells and the sound of foghorns rising up from the harbour.

*“People will tell you secrets, knowing that you will eventually leave. Sometimes they may rally round you because, sick of their own kind, they need an external focus.”*

John Fox describes projects such as *Town Hall Tattoo* as “social poetry of a high order within a very specific community context” (ibid. 116). It’s a lovely description of what the best community arts have to offer. Barrow proved to be a turning point for Welfare State International following a long period in which they allowed art products to prevail over daily life and similar processes: “Previously we were obliged to start from Art rather than from Living, to generate more product rather than process and work to rapid (and to an extent commercial) deadlines in strange lands. We could not allow ourselves to develop pieces organically over years, or respond to follow up the longer term needs and rhythms of the host community, because essentially we were not part of any community” (ibid., 116). This all started changing in 1990 when, partly due to exhausting and financially risky European tours, Welfare State International settled more or less permanently in Ulverston, 15 kilometres north of Barrow, to concentrate exclusively on community arts.

Ulverston is a small town with just over 10,000 inhabitants, 150 kilometres northwest of Manchester, just south of the Lake District National Park. Welfare State originally started there with a modest lantern festival in 1983. A combination of perseverance, repetition and accumulation meant that by the start of the 1990s, the event had established itself with broad support in the community and had gained a national reputation. Plans gradually grew in this period to transform a Victorian former school building into a permanent centre for participatory arts. In January 1996 the group successfully applied for a 1.5 million pound subsidy from the British lottery fund – partly thanks to a playful presentation in London. The conversion of what was later to be named “Lanternhouse” was to take several years. The group viewed the entire process as an ongoing, living work of art and marked stages along the way with public artistic rituals. Just occasionally Welfare State would allow themselves to become involved in major events such as the Millennium celebration, which took 100 days to prepare, but they invested most of their time and energy at Lanternhouse in education and intimate nonreligious funerals and baptism ceremonies.

### The wisdom of an old Fox

John Fox weaves into *Eyes on Stalks* a number of important principles for producing site-specific community arts. He writes, for example, that if you are planning to work somewhere, it’s a good idea to explore the area exactly a year before – and not do as he did in Japan in 1982 when he visited in the winter prior to working there in the sweltering heat of summer (Fox 2002, 69). He also recommends taking advantage of local nature and daylight: “often the weather is our best ally and offers moments of unpredictable beauty ... the critical time for ‘rain insurance’ in the north of England is over tea-time. If it rains then, people won’t go out” (ibid., 40). The same ecological principle applies when connecting with cultural traditions that initially appeared to be defined by ecclesiastical and agricultural calendars but “which themselves overlaid pagan and Celtic festivals, all of which still mirror our climactic pattern in Britain” (ibid., 50). For example, in the 1980s the group transformed the somewhat stuffy tradition of church hall barn dances into an event in “unrecognisable dream palaces with specially designed lanterns, illuminated paintings on canvas” with lively music and short plays performed for an audience that “would not normally have been interested in theatre” (ibid., 64).

Although Welfare State realised around 1990 how important it is to engage with the community for a longer period, Fox also believes that it can sometimes be beneficial to remain an outsider: “people will tell you secrets, knowing that you will eventually leave. Sometimes they may rally round you because, sick of their own kind, they need an external focus. Even if you become a scapegoat – in which case you have to have a good escape route – you can have a healing effect” (ibid., 101).

Fox sees that ensuring artistic quality and leaving a legacy of the skills necessary to maintain it in the local community requires a level of dedication beyond the reach of the average community arts participant: “Most of the successful and fulfilled artists I know work at their play obsessively for ten hours a day. I do so myself. Why should we community artists expect the public to do the same?” (ibid., 149).

On 1 April 2006 – All Fools’ Day – Welfare State International officially ceased to exist. “My parents didn’t want to do that anymore so they wanted to downsize and the simplest thing was for the company to stop”, their son Dan Fox explains (personal interview, Utrecht, 4 November 2011). The group’s legacy was taken over by Lanternhouse, but acute financial problems meant that the doors of this imposing building were closed in mid-2012 and that the property was put on the market. The Ulverston Lantern Festival remains just as popular as it ever was and whenever they can the Fox family participate each year as ordinary volunteers. The hard lessons learnt by Welfare State International in four decades live on in the work of John Fox and Sue Gill’s son Dan, and in the activities of a handful of Dutch artists who earned their stripes with the site-specific performance group Dogtroep, who themselves became active in community arts after 2004.

### The theory of the paradox

Baz Kershaw is an internationally renowned theatre scholar who actively participated in several Welfare State productions. He views the group as a chameleon whose trademark is the paradox (Coult and Kershaw 1990, 204):

It is the same with the imagery of the shows ... nature and technology collide in the image of ... the crocodile with nuclear missiles for teeth. And similar techniques inform the music, which slips easily between continents, cultures and historical periods, combining ritualistic drumming with state-of-the-art electronic manipulations ... And now the same pattern can be read in the company's ... decision to put down roots in Ulverston, on the edge of the most polluted sea in Europe ... the company so famous for ... its opposition to institutionalisation, had now got a mortgage and taken up residence in a former institution (Coult and Kershaw 1990, 201–202)

The company's paradoxical flirtation with the establishment started in 1974 when Welfare State International accepted its first Arts Council funding. They used the £12,000 they received to buy a large truck (Fox 2002, 164). Kershaw wrote in 1990 about how the group used an ever-changing array of styles and forms ("one-man backpack storytelling to giant processional imagery", Coult and Kershaw 1990, 205) to resist the relentless tendency of all arts funding bodies to pigeonhole artists.

Kershaw includes his discussion of the paradoxical aspects of Welfare State International's operation with a compelling analysis of *Raising the Titanic*, which attracted a great deal of attention at the 1983 edition of the London Festival of Theatre (LIFT). The show was performed in East London, at the geographical boundary between an impoverished area of docklands and a new, upmarket housing development in former warehouses. A hundred and fifty local residents and 60 professionals participated. Kershaw demonstrates how the entire event was rife with apparent contrasts. The market of handmade and self-produced local goods was followed up by a spectacular and technically complex show that merged the miniature and the large-scale – from the world's smallest Titanic stuffed into a motorbike sidecar to a huge crane lifting a 25-meter long skeleton of the stern of the *Titanic* out of the water – and ended with a party with live music. Baz Kershaw describes this last section as a metaphoric dance on the smouldering ashes of the *Titanic*, symbolising the corrupt West that literally went up in flames at the end of the show. "As the dance finishes", writes Kershaw poetically, "a flotilla of flickering lanterns, made by the local community, floats gently across the dock. The image stakes a claim: where all the systems of the *Titanic* failed the creativity of the people will, perhaps, succeed" (ibid., 216).

Kershaw detects many more contradictions within the larger framework encompassing *Raising the Titanic*: the merging of carnivalesque and avant-garde elements; the mix of less well-educated local people from deprived neighbourhoods and the well-educated international festivalgoers; the use of costly materials and technical equipment in a very expensive production that was

raising the issue of disproportionate consumerism (ibid., 217). What was particularly clever, writes Kershaw, is the way in which Welfare State International succeeded in transforming these contradictions into paradoxes by presenting them transparently and with blatant irony (ibid., 218). And if you are prepared to look beneath the surface, he argues, after also scrutinising paradoxes in the earlier work of the company in Barrow, a simple lantern in the streets of Ulverston can suddenly become a radical sign: "They can be consumed by flames in an instant, but when they gather at dusk together to make enormous images of hope it seems they will last forever" (ibid., 230).

### Dogtroep

Welfare State worked over the years with a constantly shifting ensemble of artists. The core members were John Fox, Sue Gill and Howard Steel (who died in 1989), together with Boris and Maggie Howarth. People often came from abroad to join the group for shorter or longer periods. The Belgian musician Luc Mishalle, for example, worked with Welfare State in the 1980s before moving on to become one of the driving forces behind the Zinnekes parade and MET-X in Brussels (Coult and Kershaw 1990, 31–41, see also De Bruyne 2010, 35–51). And sometime in 1974 a young student from Utrecht joined Welfare State when it had set up camp at the edge of a waste dump near the town of Burnley. That young man's name was Warner van Wely. Like John Fox he was interested in Fluxus and other experiments involving the convergence of art and everyday life (Boer et al. 2010, 14):

This was what I'd been searching for. The words, "I can do this and I'm going to do this," thundered in my mind. There at Welfare State I decided my life would take another course. When I returned to the Netherlands I gave up my room, my job, my position as student-assistant at the Utrecht University's Logic department. I got a job as a night doorman on Rembrandtplein in Amsterdam. That's how I saved enough money to go back to Welfare State. I stayed with them the whole winter in northern England – for five months (ibid., 15).

After this "apprenticeship" Van Wely went on in the spring of 1975 to found Dogtroep together with Paul de Leeuw. Not long afterwards Jos Zandvliet, Lino Hellings and Cathrien Bos joined Van Wely and De Leeuw left the group. Soon, the company began to attract international attention with its imaginative and intensely visual interactions with public space. Van Wely's 2008 description suggests Welfare State's anarchistic, surreal and paradoxical spirit was obviously alive and well in his work at the time:

We were self-taught. We weren't actors. We were artists – or had taught ourselves how to become artists. Our work was driven by a totally naive energy. We couldn't always define what we produced. It was ambiguous. We made collages that triggered all kinds of associations in the viewer's mind. In one of our shows I stood on a cart, on top of a three thousand litre drum of Unterberg that we had found on a roadside in Germany. We'd painted a gigantic bird onto it, and we used an ingenious system of ropes you pulled to make the wings and neck go up and down. I always loved riding around

town with the ten metre wings flapping and almost touching the windows of shops and offices – it gave you a really powerful feeling. You were doing something that ordinary people are never allowed to do (ibid., 16).

## *“Even when those people are not in a show you can still make a connection with them.”*

As with Bread & Puppet and Welfare State, this is not the place for re-exploring the colourful life and times of Dogtroep, the street theatre makers who went on to create international festival spectacles.<sup>12</sup> What is relevant for our story, however, is the relationship between Dogtroep and Welfare State International and the fact that it inspired Dutch artists in their later work in community arts. “Dogtroep is part of my life”, wrote John Fox in 2008 when attempting to explain how much it meant to him when his children Daniel and Hannah started working with Dogtroep in 1990:

Sue Gill and I thought we had lost them to both the Netherlands and a supreme world of the most extraordinary innovative site-specific, visceral theatre we had ever seen. And that includes our own. We saw a number of shows. Performers walked on fiery wheels in the sky. Giant walls tumbled in opera-houses. A pregnant cyclist gave birth to a contortionist. Our daughter, with a hair-do made of spaghetti, sat in a drydock that filled with seawater while her hair seemingly caught fire. Our son swam in the same dock to play trombone on a sinking raft (Boer et al., 2008, 20–21).

In 1992, Hannah Fox was invited to collaborate on the Dogtroep show *Camel Gossip* in a former tram shed in Glasgow, and she remained with the company. “I have never been so happy, so tired, so inspired, so frightened, so strong, so lonely and so challenged as working with this bunch”, she wrote in 2008. “These five years or so educated me as an artist like no other experience on earth” (ibid., 232).

Dan Fox’s first experience working with Dogtroep was in 1990 when his parents’ company and the Dutch group were working in the South of France at the same time. He was spending his summer holidays playing in the Welfare State band and Dogtroep happened to be looking for a trombonist for a series of concerts in The Hague. So he decided to travel with them back to the Netherlands. The following year he did a short stint of work experience with Dogtroep for his Theatre and Media Studies course at York University. A few months later he was taken on as a paid band member at Dogtroep, where he played together with Peter de Boer and Ted van Leeuwen. He took a lot from his experiences there:

12 In his contribution to the Dogtroep book Paul de Leeuw describes how the company arrived at their name. “As well as [Dogtroep ('dog mess')] being a cynical anagram of *God roept* (God is Calling), it was also a homage to Giordano Bruno, whose life was brought to an early end when he was burnt at the stake 1600 in Rome. Bruno was a Dominican, which means, literally, dog (*canis*) of God (*domini*). The German author Max Sebald writes that the dog carries a great secret. ... Bruno was part of a tradition that used a remarkable technique to retain universal wisdom. This technique is known as 'memory theatre', which involves transforming the memory into a theatre where items of information are associated with images, preferably bizarre ones” (Boer et al., 22).

“People like Jos Zandvliet gave me a lot of time, a lot of energy, and helped me develop my music and gave me responsibility to do things. I had to step up and do my best to be part of that, because everybody had such strong skills” (2012, interview).

What Welfare State and Dogtroep had most in common, Dan Fox believes, is their visual language and use of live music. However, he sees Welfare State as having had a closer connection with the local people where they worked:

Particularly when Welfare State was working in a community its ethos was about empowering people to use their own creativity and to be able to make their own work. Not as a kind of social work but as in creativity being part of daily life, like brushing your teeth. With Dogtroep it was slightly different. Sometimes people from the community were part of the show. But they were given a role and a costume and were asked to pull this or that along. Mind you: I think they were happy in that role. I don’t think there was any manipulation. That also had to do with the travelling to other countries. It is also about making a connection with people on a working level that you can do when you are working in a town. Even when those people are not in a show you can still make a connection with them. You can inspire them by being so off the wall that they go, “Wow, I could maybe do something like that!” (ibid.).

## **Sint Maarten in Utrecht**

Dan Fox finds both Welfare State’s and Dogtroep’s approach appealing.

In the short documentary accompanying this chapter he looks back in detail on this period. He no longer works permanently in a given community because he has noticed that it can drain you. “You give out so much energy and try to bring people along, but actually: how do you refresh your own creativity?” (ibid.). In Utrecht’s revamped Sint Maarten celebration, which has existed in its present form since 2011, Dan Fox is responsible for making the lanterns and larger figures, while Peter de Boer focuses primarily on the music. The idea is to use innovative impulses from England to stimulate development of a popular annual festival of visual and musical community arts to revitalise the centuries-old Sint Maarten tradition.<sup>13</sup> As Dan learnt from his father, you can be pretty sure everything will work out fine if you keep it simple, repeat it year after year, don’t get overambitious, and teach simple techniques to the local population:<sup>14</sup>

13 Rien Sprenger had the initial idea. He and fellow former Dogtroep member Margreet Melman developed the original plan for the project. Rien and I went to Prague to visit Archa Theater (which also came to our first festival in November 2006). While there, we met Michael Romanyshyn who had been the bandleader for Bread & Puppet Theatre for many years. He has been working at Archa since 2009 setting up the Allstar Refjudzji Band, an orchestra made up entirely of asylum seekers (see Romanyshyn 2013). This group inspired the formation of Fanfare van het Vuur, which Peter de Boer from Fort van de Verbeelding and the Utrechtse Muziekhuis set up to put community music on the map. The idea of getting Dan Fox involved came in 2010 when Margreet Melman and Peter de Boer saw him working on lanterns for a huge event in Diepenheim, in the Dutch province of Overijssel.

14 “The event is frequently written up as if it were a long-standing Cumbrian tradition that has been there forever. But, as Hobsbawm the wily historian has pointed out (mainly in reference to English royalty), any tradition can be started in four years” (Fox 2002, 150).



My history with lanterns goes back a long way. In 1982, Welfare State went to Japan to make a show at a theatre festival. During that festival we went to explore a few local towns. One of the traditions they have in Japan is making paper lanterns. Some of the artists working on that project thought that was a nice thing and wanted to try some of that back in England. When we came back they found some local materials like willow and tissue paper and made a prototype. They ran a few local workshops and did a small lantern procession with fifty lanterns or so in September 1983. It carried on as an annual event and each year it grew and grew to the point that there were thousands of lanterns being made every year with a big show (2011 interview).

For Dan Fox, the key to success is to create a prototype using simple techniques that can be passed on using an open source approach. “And if people don’t come and make lanterns, there is no lantern procession” (ibid.). His words echo the original ambitions of the pioneering generation that included his own father and Peter Schumann, people who were looking for ways to seamlessly merge art and everyday life:

Often people say, “I can’t do that. I have never made anything in my life.”

But the technique is very simple and actually as people start doing it you can see a weight lift from their shoulders. They start to think more with their fingers than with their brains and that is something we are more and more in danger of losing touch with. Through this work people become involved again and feel a connection with the lantern. They are proud of what they have made. And then lots of people have that. They come together and it becomes a celebration (ibid.).

Peter de Boer uses music to achieve a similar clustering effect. Building on the foundations of the amateur street orchestra De Tegenwind, the local brass band from Zuilen, and a handful of professionals connected with Muziekhuis in Utrecht and Fort van de Verbeelding, in 2012 he also drew in pupils from the local music school. He is hoping that the De Fanfare van het Vuur city orchestra will grow each year.

*“It was an absolutely enchanting sight.  
All along the route, upstairs windows slid  
open and pedestrians looked on in wonder.”*

At 7pm on Saturday 10 November 2012, Zeedijk in Utrecht was abuzz with activity. Light cables were wound around railings along the river Vecht, and welcome warmth rose up from the braziers. Parents wandered with their children from stall to stall picking up free mandarins. At 7.30, a small orchestra clothed in red struck up from an illuminated garden on the opposite bank. This was ZFunC, a group conducted by Thijs Hazeleger and made up of musicians from the Zuilense Fanfare, which wants to play in local communities. One by one, we saw lanterns shaped like musical instruments being drawn across the water: a trumpet,



At work during the Lantern workshop. Photo: Anna van Kooij, 2012.

a djembe, a double bass and a saxophone. Just like the hundreds of lanterns and the previous year's huge, imposing figure of Sint Maarten astride his horse, they were made of willow twigs and tissue paper. In addition to the musical instruments, Dan Fox this year worked with local artists to create a beautiful revolving terrestrial globe being embraced by a man and a woman, being pushed forward on an antique cart. It was their rendition of a new local symbol for a peaceful community. The makers had used the same techniques that Welfare State International first saw in Japan in 1982. At 8pm on the dot a procession of hundreds of children, parents, musicians and the giant illuminated figures started moving towards Utrecht city centre. It was an absolutely enchanting sight. All along the route, upstairs windows slid open and pedestrians looked on in wonder. At 8.30 the colourful, joyful procession passed through the city gate and on to Dom Square. There the procession mingled with the community choirs and the hundred-strong Fanfare van het Vuur. During the concert that followed, the illuminated figure of Sint Maarten on his horse rose up into the air on hydraulic scaffolding. It was less spectacular than the previous year, when Sint Maarten rose up on a pneumatic mast accompanied by thousands of lanterns – and also less mischievous than Queen Victoria's enormous bloomers in Barrow, which suddenly sprang to mind.

This great tableau of hundreds of self-made triangular lanterns, the rotating globe, illuminated images, Sint Maarten on his horse, combined with the original lively music from the city orchestra and choir, seemed to embody a promise through which an echo of the past could be heard. I perceived in the deceptively simple giant figures and the music of the Utrechtse Sint Maarten Parade a slightly tamer reincarnation of the anarchistic spirit invoked by Bread & Puppet, Welfare State International and Dogtroep which has been nourishing the world for fifty years. All of these artists created a memorable moment in the daily lives of people in the community – a peaceful, nonreligious, beautifully visualised celebration of all that they share. “If they all come to the parade and next year bring their friends, it will grow”, says Dan Fox. “If in three to five years it is still going and completely run by people from Utrecht, that is what we're aiming at” (2012 interview). Because only then will the lanterns achieve their full paradoxical potential. Individually, they are highly flammable, but if they are nurtured by society they can bring warmth to the cold and light to the darkness, and – if you only wish to see it – could keep on burning for evermore.

### ***3. Máxima and the man from the lab***

**No one would dispute that the most unambiguous form of community arts in the Netherlands came into being with the founding of Stut Theater in 1977. Just as Boal had discovered several years earlier in Latin America that a passive spectator could transform into an active “spect-actor” by placing himself on the stage and participating, the founders of Stut discovered that political theatre with a message for working people is far more effective in conveying that message when it is performed by the workers themselves, rather than interpreted by middle-class professional actors.<sup>15</sup>**

Stut’s genesis is described in detail in *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives* (Van Erven 2001, 56–70). It is the story of Jos Bours and Marlies Hautvast, two highly committed, socially aware artists from Limburg who laid the foundations for their theatre methodology at the Academie voor Expressie (which later became the Utrecht School of the Arts) and their first project in Pijlsweerd (Bours and Van den Hoek 1984; Bours and Hautvast 2006). Stut’s defining and original approach involves first carefully developing relationships with people from poorer communities who have stories to tell, then transcribing those stories as literally as possible before distilling elements from interviews and using this material as the basis for improvising onstage with the interviewees. Stut then reworks this systematically sourced and produced material into a script tailored to the specific actors, who then rehearse. Professional light, sound and set designers then help achieve the best possible result onstage. The resulting play is performed dozens of times at community venues in Utrecht and elsewhere in the country. It ensures that stories that might otherwise never see the light of day are heard in their original voice, and given a place in Dutch society. For the actors, it is an intense cultural experience that they carry with them for the rest of their lives.

Stut first received regular funding from the state in 1981, after having operated for five years on an entirely voluntary basis. In 1984 the City of Utrecht took on responsibility for paying this grant, partly due to the pressure caused by members of the local community loudly expressing their support at council meetings where the matter was under discussion.<sup>16</sup> Community theatre had a fairly firm footing

<sup>15</sup> Although Boal did not describe his form of drama as “community theatre”, Cuban artists did use its Spanish equivalent *teatro de la comunidad* from 1974 onwards. Their methodology was also similar to that used by Utrecht’s community theatre. They made plays based on interviews, improvisations and strong relationships, all developed over a period of about ten months with workers or farmers. These plays also went on tour (see Garzón Cespedes 1977). In the 1920s the American professor Alexander Drummond used the term “community theatre” for experiments he carried out that involved getting poorly educated people from rural areas of New York state to write their own plays (Gard 1993: 28). And Jan Cohen-Cruz (2005, 11) regards John Reid’s 1915 *Paterson Pageant*, a theatrical protest march involving 1500 immigrants, to be one of the earliest modern examples of community theatre.

<sup>16</sup> This pressure was necessary, because the councillor for culture at the time was unenthusiastic about the project. He still had painful memories of the first ever Stut production in Pijlsweerd, which was forthright in taking Utrecht politicians to task. (see Van Erven 2001, 62)

in local politics from this moment on, although it would be a long time before the majority of the established theatre world would start to take it seriously. However, there was a steady growth of support for these activities in Utrecht’s working-class districts, while Stut’s work continued to develop and evolve along with the shifting populations in these areas. One consequence was that in the early 1990s the company’s work started gaining an increasingly intercultural dimension. In 1997 I worked together with the New Zealander filmmaker Rod Prosser, documenting in detail the development of Stut’s play *Tears in the Rain* (*Tranen in de regen*). It was in this period that I became fully aware of just how effective this theatre work was in a social context. Stut’s approach is similar to that of the Australian company Big hART, who believe that once you know the story of an “other”, you are far less likely to want to hurt that person (Schaefer 2013). This certainly applies in the case of *Tears in the Rain*. In that year, Dutch, Turkish and Moroccan parents worked closely together exploring similarities and differences in their approaches to bringing up teenagers. Although they differed with respect to their approach to parental discipline, the lullabies they sang or the dishes they cooked, there was no disparity between the three population groups when it came to their love for their children. In the months of improvisations in rehearsals, they learned each other’s stories, had heated discussions, and spoke frankly on issues such as discrimination. They ultimately stood united onstage in a powerful and affecting play that refused to gloss over cultural differences. Its wildly diverse audiences were deeply touched by the candid and sincere tone and the powerful, authentic performances (Van Erven 2001, 85–88; see also Bours and Hautvast 1998).

It was several years before research was first carried out into how this specific form of theatre communicates with its audience. That research, a study of Stut’s *Familie à la Turca*, was carried out by CAL-Utrecht in collaboration with the Department of Art Policy and Management at Utrecht University. The play explored the tensions between three generations of a Turkish family living in the Overvecht district of Utrecht. It was directed by the young Turkish theatre maker Güner Güven in the 2006–2007 season, under the supervision of Hautvast and Bours, and it was seen by more than 2000 people. Surveys conducted immediately after each performance and follow-up phone calls a year later demonstrated that especially non-Turkish audience members had learned a great deal that was of intercultural value to them and that this information was still remembered by them after 12 months (Cerovečki et al. 2010, 348–51). A second, more psychologically-oriented study carried out by CAL-Utrecht researcher Ivana Cerovečki in April 2009, revealed in what ways various Turkish and non-Turkish audience members had identified with individual characters from *Familie à la Turca* (ibid., 356–357). It meant that for the first time our research was substantiating the assumption that community theatre does more than merely initiate superficial intercultural communication with its audience and that it is able to break down stereotyping of “the other”.

It is only logical that the strongest effects when it comes to breaking down preconceptions and increasing social and cultural competences are felt by those most actively involved, i.e. the actors themselves. There is ample anecdotal



evidence for this phenomenon (see Jermyn 2001 and Weigler 2011).<sup>17</sup> Working in the rapidly expanding international field of community arts theory, the American art historian Grant Kester has come up with other arguments to account for the experiences of participants in community arts projects. He quotes the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas:

This egalitarian interaction cultivates a sense of “solidarity” among discursive participants, who are, as a result, “intimately linked in an inter-subjectively shared form of life.” While there is no guarantee that these interactions result in a consensus, we nonetheless endow them with a provisional authority that influences us toward mutual understanding and reconciliation (Kester 2004, 109–110).

Kester believes that empathy, the ability to understand and enter into another person’s feelings, is an important component for bridging people’s differences:

We can never claim to fully inhabit the other’s subject position; but we can imagine it, and this imagination, this approximation, can radically alter our sense of who we are. It can become the basis for communication and understanding across differences of race, sexuality, ethnicity, and so on (ibid., 115).

Extending Kester’s line of thought into our context, one can easily imagine that the act of bringing together a group of people within the framework of the community arts project to work on material emanating from their own lives would be perfectly capable of generating that much-needed empathy.

“Empathy” is a key term in Stut’s vocabulary; others are “equality”, “reciprocity” and “genuine commitment”. These qualities explain in part why this organisation has been so successful for several decades in cultivating an understanding of “the other” in places where social contrasts are highest. These qualities are equally defining for the relationship between the artists and the actors on the one hand and the relationships between the participating members of the community on the other. This doesn’t presuppose that there will never be disagreement about personal, cultural or ideological issues, but it does mean that differences that arise during the project will be respected – right up to the final performance, and often long after that (Van Erven 2011).

### Location, location, location

In 2007 I wrote that a primary aim for Stut and like-minded companies is to give people living in deprived or working-class areas the opportunity to reduce the distance between themselves and “the other”, and between the neighbours themselves (Van Erven 2007, 29). These groups achieve their aims, each in their own unique style, by using multilayered and sometimes contradictory narratives to express onstage a nuanced perspective on the world. Elsewhere in the same article I examined the benefits that performing at a site-specific location can have for both the substance and the artistic potential of the play. Jan Cohen-Cruz

<sup>17</sup> However, see also Rustom Bharucha’s warning (2011) to exercise restraint when it comes to anecdotal evidence. It is not absolute truth, and it is always obtained through leading questions and rooted in specific historical contexts that, in turn, have an influence on the respondent’s language and formulation.

demonstrated this with a memorable piece that Cornerstone Theatre Company made together with workers who had just been made redundant by the closure of a blast furnace in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (2005, 164–67). Humankind, it turns out, records its memory not only in language and stories, but also in the visible and tangible media of material objects, buildings, streets, neighbourhoods and workplaces. Site-specific community theatre uses an artistic tool to accentuate the physical and spiritual dimensions of a place, using all the senses to convey its message to the audience, reinforcing the verbal and non-verbal performances by local people.<sup>18</sup>

*“For immigrants who have had to leave their homeland, it is a challenge indeed to create a pleasant place for themselves in a sometimes hostile community that they have not necessarily chosen.”*

Many sociologists and philosophers provide evidence that any place in which we spend a significant part of our lives will have a strong influence on our sense of identity. The relationship between physical environment and personal identity has come under particular strain in those former working-class areas where there have been dramatic shifts in population make-up due to immigration. What was once the one and only suitable environment for families who had lived in the area for generations has now for many become unsuitable, or at least uncomfortable. And for immigrants who have had to leave their homeland, it is a challenge indeed to create a pleasant place for themselves in a sometimes hostile community that they have not necessarily chosen. Miwon Kwon writes that a stressful relationship such as this with one’s immediate surroundings is an obstacle to the development of a coherent sense of identity and a relationship with the world (2000, 33; see also Dawsey 2005).

We now know, thanks to the work of cultural theorists such as the Jamaican Stuart Hall (1996), that identity is unstable and in continual development. We merely pretend that it is unchanging for political and strategic reasons (see Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 13), such as when populist politicians assert that there is such a thing as a pure and unchanging national identity. One long-term study in various European cities shows that residents of working-class areas are nowadays well aware of the influence on their sense of identity of cultural, ethnic and societal

<sup>18</sup> In *Living with Differences (Leven Met Verschillen)* I explain this process, taking as my example *Away from the Valuwe (Weg van de Valuwe)*, an affecting site-specific play made by Anouk de Bruijn in her hometown of Cuijk, in collaboration with Stut (Van Erven 2010, 89–91). Other recent examples of site-specific community theatre include the many productions by BAF in Dordrecht and Rotterdam, *Zhōng* (2011) by Rotterdams Wijktheater (Rotterdam Community Theatre, RWT) in their city’s Chinatown and *Uprooted (Uit je Klei Getrokken)*, 2012) by Jasmina Ibrahimovic in her hometown of Rozenburg.

changes in their communities, including those caused by the invasion of new media in their privacy (Morley 2000, 6). Despite this, the emotional connection to their immediate surroundings remains strong, either because they were born there themselves or, in the case of newcomers, because their children were born there.<sup>19</sup>

An area that is undergoing just such a societal and cultural shift is Utrecht's Rivierenwijk. It is situated southwest of the old city centre, wedged between two main roads, the Rijnlaan and Jutfaseweg. Starting in September 2005 Stut applied its tried and tested method in developing a new community theatre production together with local residents entitled *Máxima's Coming!* (*Máxima Komt!*).

Some aspects of this production were new, however. One was the first-time director Donna Risa, who had been working at Stut since 2000, and another was the involvement of the Treaty of Utrecht's Community Arts Lab, which made a tentative start on its documentation and coaching work in the summer of 2006. Every week from late August to late November 2006 I took a video camera to rehearsals, solely to document the special relationship between Donna Risa and her cast – to them I became “the man from the lab”.

### The relationship is the art

Generally speaking, community arts are all about special alliances between artists and people who would not normally come into close or intensive contact with art or artists. Although artists who choose to do this sort of work have generally had the benefit of a professional arts education, they are often troubled by the smug complacency of the mainstream art world establishment, which serves only a limited section of society. Donna Risa is just such an artist. She grew up in a mixed Indonesian and Dutch family for whom visits to concerts or plays were a rarity: “The primary school musical school and the secondary school review – that was about it actually”, she told me in an interview at her home in Overvecht.<sup>20</sup>

Conventional artists operating independently under self-determined conditions make art works that circulate in the art world and accumulate value.

Kester believes that the work of a community artist is intrinsically different in that it consists of an “open process of dialogical interaction which in itself must be regarded as the work of art” (2004, 87).<sup>21</sup> The true value of community arts can be divined from the way an artist relates to people, brings out their talents and imbues them with the self-confidence to present themselves in all their

19 To understand this phenomenon, Pearson and Shank introduce the intriguing concept of the “first square mile”. It is that area in the immediate vicinity of a toddler's home which he explores creeping, tasting, looking, and listening. He will get to know that place in detail like no other and it will remain forever rooted in his memory. (Pearson and Shanks 2001, 138–139).

20 This conversation took place on 13 September 2006 to reconstruct the chronology of *Máxima's Coming!* in the period prior to my involvement. In 2005 I was still living on Aruba. Unless indicated, all subsequent quotes from Donna Risa come from this interview.

21 According to Miwon Kwon the role of the community artist meanders between “cultural-artistic service provider” and “producer of aesthetic objects” (2004, 5). Like Kester she believes that not the artefact but the relationship between artist, participant and the public is the real art work (ibid., 105). Jan Cohen-Cruz considers community arts projects in their *totality* as works of art (2005, 111–120). And Richard Schechner puts it even more bluntly: “the process *is* the product” (Gielen and De Bruyne 2011, 222).



Card from Donna Risa to Eugène van Erven, 2006. The text reads: “Suddenly there you were and you really wanted to film the process. To some you were the man from the lab. To others you were the man with the camera. To me you are my truly noble-born and most noble guardian of the process, colleague & friend. It's just Eugene, you fool! Love from Donna.



vulnerability to an audience, comes up again and again with creative solutions, facilitates difficult discussions, remains sensitive to the needs of the participants, and then, to cap it all, manages to produce a well-crafted work of art together with non-artists. Kester explains that if we want to understand this process, we must radically readjust our definition of the artist from heroic individual genius to a personality that is open and dares to be receptive to the people with whom he or she is working (ibid., 110).<sup>22</sup> A community artist may choose to accumulate varying degrees of power in the process, but it will always be about more than solely the pure beauty of art. Cohen-Cruz puts it this way: “they want their art to have some concrete social impact” (2005, 97). It is crucial that artists and non-artist participants undergo an intensive process through which both parties change and benefit. Donna Risa perfectly fits the profile:

The lives of the people whom we make theatre with are just as interesting and beautiful as someone who’s travelled all over the world or has a fascinating job. That’s what makes this work different from regular theatre. You need to be genuinely interested in their lives. It’s different from when you’re working with a professional actor and you ask them to do this, that or the other. And in that case, the relationship – the bond of trust, the whole group process – just isn’t as important. You don’t need to tell them how they’re supposed to act because they already learned how to do it at drama school. We’re dealing with an untrained group that you want to teach something about theatre and who you want to convince of their own beauty. You just know they’ve got stories in them, as good as any novel. I need to feel that interest. I don’t think you’d survive if you wanted to make plays with local people in which *you* wanted to say something, if you were looking for someone who did exactly what you want them to. It’s a process of coming together that takes at least two years.

*Máxima’s Coming!* came into being in exactly the way any community artist would want it to: ordinary people from the community asked Stut to come along and help them make a play about their working-class neighbourhood. In the spring of 2005, a group of women working at a self-help organisation in the Rivierenwijk area of Utrecht called Trefpunt were encouraged by the parish priest to go and see *My Bittersweet Lombok* (*Mijn Bitterzoet Lombok*), a play produced by Stut. They were so impressed by it that a few days later one of the women from Trefpunt telephoned Stut to ask whether it would be possible for them to do something similar. Following an initial meeting at Trefpunt, Stut decided at the next weekly team meeting to comply with their request. Donna Risa realised at the time that it was, “pretty special to be invited in this way”:

The three productions I’d made up to that point with young Moroccan people really all came out of *my own* interests, which I’d been able to build on by interviewing them and asking whether they’d like to take part.

<sup>22</sup> Kate Crehan correctly points out that community arts has developed its own market system. Professional artists working in this field – and who want to qualify for funding in the future – will also need to work on their reputation by in any case claiming partial authorship and ownership of community arts projects (2012, 185).

*My Bittersweet Lombok* was made in response to a request by the shopkeepers association, to mark the centenary of the Lombok district in Utrecht. So that was also through a request from the community. But the way it happened with Bea – someone just living locally – was a completely different starting point that came directly from being inspired by seeing the Lombok play.

*“Kester explains that if we want to understand this process, we must radically readjust our definition of the artist from heroic individual genius to a personality that is open and dares to be receptive to the people with whom he or she is working.”*

Following on from a long career in youth work Donna Risa had trained to become a drama teacher at the Utrecht School of the Arts, and this was to be her first time working with an adult cast:

I wondered whether I could ask them about the same sorts of things I asked the young people: more intimate things about their lives. It did feel different from how you talk with young people. Looking back I’d say the biggest difference is that young people just talk and don’t think all that consciously about what they’re going to say or how they’re going to say it. If you do that with adults, they tend to self-censor at first. They’re thinking you’re digging around in their lives and they don’t like it. But then it turned out there is no difference, because they’re just as keen to tell their stories as the young people.

### **Donna’s working method, week by week<sup>23</sup>**

Bea from the Trefpunt placed an ad in the self-help organisation’s own local paper *De Rivierenwijker*, and in September 2005 nine people attended the first meeting for this theatre project. Of the six women, Suzanne was the youngest at 17, Marleny and Adrie were in their thirties, and Lien, Bea, Marian and Catharina were 60 or thereabouts. Albert, who was in his late forties, was the oldest of the men, followed by thirty-something Tycho, and Gijs, a student in his twenties. Unusually for Stut, interculturality played no part in this production – apart from the story of Tycho’s Bulgarian wife, which would later play out in the background. The play did however tackle intracultural themes such as poverty, domestic violence and homophobia.

That first meeting was all about getting to know one another. Not everyone knew each other and it was important to make clear to everyone involved that a project such as this would be a long haul. First off, material would be developed every week until Christmas, and then there would be rehearsals from February to mid-November, followed by twenty performances the following year.

<sup>23</sup> Reconstructed from an extensive interview with Donna Risa on 13 September.

At the second meeting, Donna made family portraits, which involved all the participants working on a tableau of each other's home situation. She asked Bea to kick things off:

She chatted away like there was no tomorrow. That's what broke the ice, and then everyone followed her lead. So that first session was really about looking into your history: Where do you come from? I used what I heard as a basis for improvisations for the next time. They were mostly about relationships at home, about how you get on with your parents. You put someone in a situation from the past and then get them to play the role of their father, or themselves, or somebody else's father. So these improvisations trigger deeper discussions or explain things more thoroughly. So the whole evening long you're doing improvisations and talking about them.

Very soon after the first improvisation sessions, Donna visited the actors in their own homes to record in-depth interviews that sometimes lasted two or three hours. In this way she managed to both capture the stories of their lives and discover how they viewed their local area and their position within the community. She learned through these conversations that the older women had experienced domestic violence in past relationships:

It was pretty intense. I mean, these women didn't know it about each other, but this was the real issue. I thought it was important to tackle it in some way in the play. So then I had to come up with some improvisations that would make it possible to bring it out into the open. That's why I got Tycho and Marleny to do a scene where she wanted to do all kinds of stuff but he wouldn't let her. Tycho's 33 and Marleny's 36, so they're young people in the eyes of the older women. Well, that opened the floodgates. Lien, one of the older players, reacted by saying, "The hair on the back of my neck stood on end when I saw that." I asked why, and then she shared her experience with the group. But she'd pretty much left the experience behind her because it was 30 years earlier. And the same went for two of the others. But one of the actresses is still in therapy for what happened to her.

In this way, Donna managed to get highly charged themes out on the table. She was clearly taking the initiative and asserting a degree of power, because the process was no longer being led by the participants' wishes. On the other hand, as Donna knows, she was able to use her position as a relative outsider to raise sensitive issues in a way that the group would never have been able to without her. She wanted to portray women as strong and confident, rather than as victims, so she sought out ways of using the play to show how at various turning points in their lives, they had found the strength they needed. However, this proposal met with unforeseen resistance from Tycho, who explained that he had joined the project to act in a play, not to listen to other people's problems. At the end of the evening he left with a thunderous expression on his face. But if the project was to continue along the path they had taken, Donna would need to win Tycho back. It was a crucial test for the strength and flexibility of the relationship between artist and participant that is so central to community arts.

At the next session a week later, Tycho was back again as usual, despite having ignored Donna's calls and emails. Suzanne immediately triggered a more light-hearted atmosphere by revealing that she had a turning point in her life every three weeks, whenever a boyfriend disappeared, or a new one arrived on the scene. This inspired Tycho, who had been silent up to that point, to talk about the turning point in his own life. It was a story that surprised everyone present, including the director:

My heart was really pounding while he was speaking and afterwards he got a round of applause from everyone. His Bulgarian girlfriend came here to study. He totally fell in love with her. It took him two years at the IND (Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service) to get her here. It turned out that he'd left home very young and had led a very lonely life. It was a turning point for him to fight so tirelessly to bring her here. And all that time he'd had to work for a boss he didn't want to work for because he needed a regular job and his own home to be able to bring his girlfriend over. When she was here at last, he went straight to his employer and said: "You can take it all and stuff it! You kept me here by blackmail because otherwise I couldn't get my wife over. I'm terminating my contract, right now!"

*"If the relationships aren't good within the group of actors or between the director and the cast, situations such as this can lead to the loss of a participant."*

The group dynamic generated by Donna Risa had apparently enabled Tycho to draw on his capacity for empathy and make him feel secure enough to tell his own story. But if the relationships aren't good within the group of actors or between the director and the cast, situations such as this can lead to the loss of a participant. Stressful moments like these make for sleepless nights, as Donna knows all too well: "The dividing line between personal emotions and professionalism can be very thin."

In the run-up to Christmas 2005 all the interviews and audio recordings from the improvisation sessions were transcribed word for word, and in January 2006 all the material was sent to Jos Bours, the playwright who was going to rework it into a script in just three weeks. He had attended most of the sessions and noted his own impressions, which fed into the writing process. While Jos was writing at home, Donna filled the weekly meetings with drama practice, allowing the actors to get used to moving in the space, projecting their voices and presenting their story on stage in a visual way.



In mid-February 2006 Donna Risa and Jos Bours read through the script, hot off the press. Donna remembers that the actors all thought that it really felt right and that they could clearly recognise their own stories. Only Albert had some doubts about whether the Snip and Snap scene would work:

Albert and Marian had been pals for more than 25 years. They both have to scrape to get by on the bare minimum. They do that in a way that makes them almost cynical at times, but they also try to keep looking on the bright side. And they complement each other in that regard, because when Albert's getting too negative Marian pulls him out of it, and vice versa. Jos described their relationship as being like Snip and Snap.<sup>24</sup>

After the first read-through, the director and the author were concerned that the scenes dealing with domestic violence might be too intense. Some of the actors found it scary to do, but everyone agreed that these stories needed to be told. Other comments related primarily to the facts of the play, and the odd word or phrase needed to be changed because those involved would never have spoken that way, for example, or because it was too negative about an acquaintance or family member. "And there was always insecurity about whether it was going to be good enough or whether they could do it", remembers Donna Risa.

The writing process was followed by months of rehearsals. Up until the summer of 2006 they were held as usual on Wednesday evening. At first, everyone attended. "They like seeing each other and seeing the play develop", the director explained at the time:

But after that I started organising separate scene rehearsals, because having people standing on the sidelines slows the process. They start interfering with the directing or they've got an idea that's really good but just wouldn't work for theatre. You start wondering whether you should be putting energy into that, because you've only got an hour and a half. Then it's better if you show the development of a particular scene every three weeks, before they all want to have their own say. But if the people in the scene itself feel it's not working, then I'm prepared to talk about it. Then we go looking for a solution so it feels credible to them. I am sensitive to that. But it's difficult if there are three people on the sidelines who've all got a brilliant idea, while you're already sure about what you want to see. Ultimately I'm the one who takes the artistic decisions.

At moments like these it is important that the artist asserts artistic power. Donna Risa sees it as her task to create the best possible work of art of which the participants can also be proud – within the time available:

Sometimes you have to tell them: "I really know what I'm doing and how best to put you on stage. I'm supporting you in everything you do, but when it comes to directing, that's my job." But that doesn't mean there's any less involvement from the actors. The artwork, the end result, still belongs to them.

24 The Dutch comedy duo Snip and Snap (Willy Walden and Piet Muijselaar) were the stars of many highly successful stage revues of the 1960s and 70s. One was stocky and jocular, while the other was skinny and serious.

I'll explain to them everything about why I make a certain decision. Sometimes one of them will say, "I'm just standing here doing nothing." So I say, "You should see how beautiful that looks." Then they step out for a minute and then they see it. They're not always aware of what they're doing on stage or how powerful silence can be.

As well as dealing with artistic matters, the director sometimes had to firmly intervene in the group dynamic. Bea was under severe stress due to her mother's poor health and she was becoming increasingly negative towards other members of the cast. It emerged that her behaviour was following a similar pattern outside rehearsals when involved in other Trefpunt activities. She brushed off Donna's request to come and talk about it at her home:

It went on for weeks like that and it saps your energy. It's got nothing to do with theatre. It's only about the group, the process, behaviour. I found that really difficult. In the meantime you need to make sure that other people don't stop because that person's making life so difficult for them. Then I realised that if it was going to go on like this I'd have to stop working with her. I'd have hated that. So I phoned the parish priest and he promised he'd tackle it. I was able to let go of it a bit after that. They had a few chats and slowly but surely her behaviour improved.

### Two other examples of patience

I once chucked a boy out, just a month before the premiere of *Garden of Secrets* (Tuin vol Geheimen). That was all about relationships that had gone completely wrong. He thought he was going steady with one of the girls and she said it wasn't true. At a certain point, the girls were feeling so threatened by it that they didn't want to act with him anymore. So then I had to do the exit interview with the boy, because otherwise we'd have had to wave goodbye to the whole project. Of course I secretly made a backup plan so we soon had a replacement who picked it up really quickly.

There was a similar sort of lad in *Curls* (Krulletjes), but we would have had a tough time finding a replacement for him. If I could do that project all over again, I'd probably do things differently. Sometimes there was just an hour to go before curtain up and I was still driving around the neighbourhood looking for him. When we found him he'd always want to pop back home first. He'd say, "I've got to change, haven't I? I can't go on stage in my sweatpants." And I'd say, "You're coming with me now!" In the end I got a lot out of that process and to this day I've still got a really strong bond with that lad. And otherwise he'd never have had anything to do with this sort of thing. It took a huge amount of energy – completely disproportional – but it did mean that the play stayed strong (personal interview, Utrecht, 20 September 2006).

By the time I was introduced to the group in September 2006 most of the problems had been ironed out. The first scenes were starting to take shape, but it became clear that some of the actors had forgotten a lot over the long summer holiday. So Donna made appointments to visit some of them individually at home for extra rehearsals. With only ten weeks to go before the premiere, there was still a lot to do. Some of the cast members were beginning to feel the pressure. Adrie, for example, who had had a miscarriage just before the summer, had doubts about whether she would continue with the project; one scene in the play involved her tenderly singing the praises of her unborn child and talking about her problematic relationship with her own father and mother. She seemed in good spirits at the one-on-one rehearsal with Donna on the afternoon of 5 September.

On the afternoon of 13 September I was at the rehearsal, which was taking place as usual in the activities room in Doenja community centre in Rivierenwijk. First the actors chatted over a cup of coffee, before Catherina and Bea went off with singing teacher Melanie Brethouwer to work on their songs. I noticed that there was some irritation between the two women actors. Meanwhile, Donna had gone off to the larger room to work with Tycho and Marleny. They went through their dialogue line for line, with the director often having to speak their lines because these two actors in particular had forgotten much of their material. The following week, Donna explained that it was bothering her:

Marleny told me she hadn't looked at her lines for eight weeks. So I was just thinking, "Do you want to be doing this or not?" Look, Tycho has difficulty learning his lines, but I think she's just being negative. And what makes it worse is that she can't do extra rehearsals, because she's got a new job. In the end it turned out she could rehearse at the weekend, and Tycho could too. So last Sunday we had a really good rehearsal at her house. But if that extra appointment hadn't worked out, I would have asked for a personal meeting.

Less than a week later the director's resilience was put to the test once more. During the evening on 26 September Donna received a text message from Adrie announcing that things weren't going well for her. A little later Donna got the news that Adrie was suffering from severe stress and wanted to stop. Donna went round to Adrie's house the following day, and just before the start of rehearsals she gave me this report:

When I heard it yesterday evening I could have cried. Panic! At the same time you're thinking, "Who could do it? How are we going to save this?" I wasn't angry. I've got too much sympathy for Adrie for that. And there'd be no point in pushing her because she'd just pull out at some later stage. I'm going to have to tell the group in a minute. I'm worried, because somebody else could easily think that they could just stop. I think that I'm going to ask that everyone shows a lot of respect for Adrie and the choice she made. This unpredictability is one of the most difficult things about community theatre. Things can change completely from one day to the next and you have to deal with a completely different situation. At the start of the project you might think, "Well, that's a pretty good group I've got myself here!" And then all kinds of unexpected things happen and you've got to readjust your whole system (personal interview, 27 September 2006).

The remaining cast members responded fairly calmly to the news. Donna gave each of them ample time to have their say. And a solution had already been found, because in just half a day Jos Bours had made changes by scrapping small sections and sharing Adrie's story out among Suzanne, Marleny and Catherina. They had already been informed that afternoon by telephone. The rest of the evening was taken up with going through the script changes step by step at the table and with the playwright and director providing information when necessary.

*"Doing this project brought up a lot of issues for her: 'Everyone has their weak moments from time to time, and when you do you realise you haven't really dealt with things from the past'."*

A "work weekend" was organised for the end of September. The professionally designed set had already been erected in the drama studio at the University College on the Prins Hendriklaan to let the cast adjust to the limitations of the space and start working with props. It gave them a chance to get some idea of what it would be like to perform. On the Saturday they were still working on individual scenes, but on Sunday 1 October all the scenes were placed in sequence for a run-through for a small invited audience. This was a crucial moment for the director and the cast, because it was the first opportunity to see how the play would look on the set.

The cast had seen a scale model of the set a few weeks earlier, and most of them now seemed happy with the final result, a replica of the kitchen at Trefpunt. Performing in it required a certain amount of adaptation on the part of the actors, because as Gijs explained, "You enter the stage from fixed points. And there's a scene where Bea sits on a throne. There's music with that, so everything has to come together exactly at this point."<sup>25</sup> Lien was nervous, joking that although "I do act at home; I've been doing that for 35 years", she was now going to be acting in public for the first time. Doing this project brought up a lot of issues for her: "Everyone has their weak moments from time to time, and when you do you realise you haven't really dealt with things from the past." Albert talks in the play about the time he was badly beaten up for being a homosexual. As a result he became unable to work. He explained that working on this project could make a person stronger: "Of course you know inside yourself that it happened, but now you're talking about it in public. I like that."

Donna learned a lot from the working weekend. She realised that too much of the play was set around the kitchen table, that the cast would have to work with radio microphones in order to be heard in the community centre, and that the final song was far too slow. But most important of all, she was seeing that the group dynamic was still fragile:

<sup>25</sup> Personal interviews in Utrecht on 30 September and 1 October 2006. The quotes that follow here from Lien, Albert, Catherina and Donna come from interviews carried out over this same weekend.

The script changes meant Marleny's taking over Adrie's story about having children. She was going to say it to Suzanne in the play, but she thought it wasn't working out. She thought Suzanne was too young to make that credible. So right there and then today we shifted it to Lien. But then Suzanne gets the feeling like "Come on, don't I count?" You have to be constantly on the lookout for this kind of thing.

Four days later, at the regular Wednesday evening rehearsal, Donna gave mostly positive feedback about the working weekend to her actors. And the cast were also glad to have at last gone through the whole play in one go, become more used to the nerves, and learned to keep on going even if they forgot their lines. But they had found find it exhausting to work so hard for two days in a row with too few breaks. Catherina:

I lay on my bed whole of Monday afternoon. But on Tuesday I rode my moped to Nieuwegein singing all the songs out loud. They just flow out. People were *staring* at me. But it also brings things back. So I felt pretty low for a while on Sunday evening (video transcription, 4 October 2006).

*“Many things went wrong that evening: actors forgot reams of lines, leading to other actors not knowing where they were in the script in subsequent scenes; the mistakes led to old wounds being opened between Bea and Catherina.”*

In the following six weeks, the focus was on increasing the pace of the performances. On 4 October, Donna started things off with what she called a “rondo”, with the actors rattling off their lines around the table. From now on, the cast would be working with the real props in the Wednesday evening rehearsals at Doenja. It would be mid-November before they could work on the actual set again, because Doenja was too small and it wouldn't have been practical to build and strike the set every week.

On 18 October Catherina gave me a more detailed account of what the project meant to her. She explained that she had often performed in musicals and operettas in the past, but never in community theatre. She was particularly struck by the atmosphere within the group:

I really admire the people around me, their openness. I really like joking around, but I'm not that quick to open up emotionally. I haven't always had it that easy either. It's a really good group. Even if you come in your old jogging trousers or your hair's a mess or you're not feeling good in yourself, they still accept it. You feel safe in the group. That's why this kind of theatre means freedom to me. You do things you wouldn't normally do at home. It feeds me. Here I'm just Catherina – not somebody's wife, or mother, or granny. You're playing a very different role.

## Crisis

On 27 October, the production relocated to De Jutter, a community centre on Amerhof in Rivierenwijk, where there was another run-through of the play, on the set – and this time with sound and lights. They performed the first try-out a few days later, on 1 November, in the nearby South Utrecht community centre on the Amaliadwarsstraat, a local venue for parties right behind the Catholic church. Many things went wrong that evening: actors forgot reams of lines, leading to other actors not knowing where they were in the script in subsequent scenes; the mistakes led to old wounds being opened between Bea and Catherina; the rickety set didn't fit properly onto the stage, putting extra pressure on the actors; people sitting at the back of the auditorium couldn't hear properly because there were no radio mics yet; and the final song was again sung lifelessly, bringing the play to an end with a whimper. All in all, it was the biggest test yet of the increasingly fragile group dynamic and the director's self-confidence.

Donna realised that the first priority was to lift the spirits of the crestfallen group as quickly as possible. So she sought to strike the right balance between constructive criticism and impressing on the actors that things were about to get serious.

First she pointed the finger at herself:

After the show, Tycho came and called me to account – and it was really good that he did – for not paying any attention to you after the show. I went to sit around the table with the technicians and other people from Stut and looking back I think I should have done it differently. I was being pulled from all sides and I just wasn't thinking clearly. I really was a bit alarmed and overwhelmed that so many things didn't go as they should. But don't get me wrong, because lots of things did go well. And I know you can do it. You'll be ready on the 18th. I'm glad that this happened now and not in two weeks' time (video transcription, 8 November 2006).

She went on to point out that wherever possible everyone should help each other out during the play, preferably without stepping out of character:

So don't say like Marian did to Albert, “Could you just say that sentence about the oxygen tanks?” because then people will notice. Or like when there's three of you turning your back to the audience and bustling about looking like you're not looking at the audience because you don't know what you're supposed to say. And Catherina, something else you shouldn't do while you're on stage is ask for a glass of water from someone behind the stage. There are glasses of water behind the stage. I now expect everyone to behave professionally during the performance. That means that if you come to the back and your scene hasn't gone well, don't go back to the back of the stage and say, “You didn't do that right.” That sort of thing doesn't help anyone.

At first, Donna's comments seemed to have had the desired effect during the run-through the following Wednesday. But when it came to the moment that Bea and Catherina had to sing a song together, Bea suddenly refused to carry on. Marleny exploded and said that just wasn't on. The others urged them to continue and in the end the play was completed. Afterwards, Donna tried to open up





a discussion about the conflict, but this escalated into the two opponents exchanging accusations, which only ended when a distressed Bea left for home and Donna burst into tears.

A few minutes later Donna had collected herself sufficiently to speak to the group: “Everything will be all right; I’ll make sure something happens.” After calming down at home, Donna called Bea just before midnight to make an appointment for the following day to talk about the incident:

I was talking to her from 12 to 1.30 today. Bea felt under attack, because something going on between the two of them had been brought up in the group. In a way I think she was right, and told her so, but I also explained that by refusing to sing that song she was making the conflict public herself. She got that. She said, “But the tension was so high and had been for a while. I just didn’t know how to deal with it any more. Plus things already hadn’t gone well with the singing teacher” (personal interview, Utrecht, 9 November 2006).

*“So the cast looked more relieved than satisfied when they at last performed a conga dance as a thank you to the audience after the 65-minute performance. But looking back over the tumultuous events of the eighteen months leading up to this moment, this ring dance was also open to other interpretations.”*

During the conversation it became clear that Bea was also under great pressure in her private life because her mother was dying, and Bea was having difficulty sleeping. Donna believed that Bea was in any case finding it difficult to express her feelings, explaining that, “It sometimes comes out in an unfortunate way, but actually I’d hate it if she stopped acting.” Catherina and Bea had a conciliatory conversation the next day at Stut’s office. Meanwhile, other concerned members were phoning the director frequently, and it was starting to look like the group might actually come out of the conflict stronger than before. Unity returned to the ranks once more at the dress rehearsal on 15 November. Some things still went wrong, however, with one actor forgetting lines, causing particular problems for the rest of the cast. But there were no negative comments this time. Just before the premiere on Friday 17 November Donna addressed each of the actors in person. Bea also received a compliment, because, after all, the play would never have happened without her and now she would be appearing on stage as the queen of the neighbourhood. The cast then performed *Máxima’s Coming!* for an enthusiastic audience of 140, mainly made up of local people.



The scene in which Lien and Bea explained to Suzanne how domestic violence can creep unnoticed into a relationship is performed with cynical humour. Another powerful moment occurs when Bea receives a phone call in the Trefpunt telling her that a woman has been beaten up in the street by her husband. At first she doesn't want Lien to go with her, but then Lien throws back at Bea: "I would have really liked it if people hadn't avoided me like the plague when it happened to me" (film transcript, 17 November 2016).<sup>26</sup> Her words flow seamlessly into Catherina's chilling "Song of the 22 Stab Wounds". Unfortunately, from that moment on the actors started to speed up their dialogue, giving the impression that they were trying to get it over and done with as quickly as possible. And despite its new calypso rhythm, the final song still lacked energy. So the cast looked more relieved than satisfied when they at last performed a conga dance as a thank you to the audience after the 65-minute performance. But looking back over the tumultuous events of the 18 months leading up to this moment, this ring dance was also open to other interpretations.

A conventional critic seeing this snapshot of *Máxima's Coming!* on 17 November would probably view the play as only partially successful. The goose-bump moments I describe above were incredibly powerful. Will Weigler uses the word "epiphany" and Ann Bogart came up with the term "aesthetic arrest" for such moments of beauty, emotion or surprise in an artwork, when everything becomes still, when everything is perfect (Weigler 2011, 19–23; Kuftinec, 17). Such a moment can occur when a sentence is improbably trenchant or poetic, and is spoken with utter authenticity by a person whom the spectator feels to be discussing something they know about because they have perhaps experienced something like it in their own lives. It may be a mute and poignant scene such as when Marian takes wheelchair-bound Albert in a loving embrace. Or it may be a song performed with full conviction.

The American theatre academic Sonja Kuftinec suggests that these moments of aesthetic arrest arise out of a particular form of authenticity. She views this as a quality criterion that is specific to the form of community theatre in which local residents play fictional versions of themselves. Kuftinec believes that a central cause of this effect is the simultaneous presence of dual identities, such as Albert or Bea, who are both fictional characters and familiar neighbours. The specific aesthetic impact of community theatre for an audience that comes from the same neighbourhood, writes Kuftinec, "depends on a sense that the audience often 'knows' the individual performer through daily interactions, while discovering something previously unknown through performance" (2003, 83). Something comparable happens to the venue where the players performed, because it can also be "read in this double-voiced manner", says Kuftinec (ibid., 78). If this is the case, then the party centre behind the church may be viewed both as a repository of local memory (through the events such as weddings and other festivities that have taken place there) and as a space for new memories nourished by the imagination.

26 The post-performance reactions were also drawn from these recordings.

*Máxima's Coming!* undoubtedly had great artistic merit in parts, but the version performed on 17 November also had weaknesses because elements of it were inadequately rehearsed and certain scenes did not work properly. Despite this, the play succeeded in staging the complex lives and outlooks of these unknown people from a relatively obscure part of Utrecht. This was no "exoticising exploitation" to satisfy an audience of outsiders craving authentic stories and identities (Kwon 2004, 138), because the dialogic relationship built up between Donna Risa and cast was too solid and the actors' contributions – to the subject matter, narrative content, language use, non-verbal performance and values – were too substantial for this to occur. Because as well as elasticity there was certainly also aesthetic beauty present in the larger web of interactions woven by the director in the period from the summer of 2005 to the end of November 2006. The primary binding agent was mutual trust – a sense of certainty that they could tell their story without fear, that they could always rely on the director, and that they would not be condemned if they got into difficulties. Inspired by the good example set by the director, there were bucketloads of empathy. This made it possible to bridge the sometimes very troubled waters stirred up by intracultural differences. That's why, as well as being an expression of relief at the end of the play, the conga was also a metaphor for the sense of solidarity generated within the group by this project. And that solidarity is still tangible to this day.

*"Stut Choir clearly embodies the essence of community arts: the fostering of lasting relationships between artists and local people."*

*Máxima's Coming!* was performed 27 times, attracting a total audience of almost 2500, before stopping in February 2008. Bea and Catherina never became close friends, but the irritations between them never again led to uncontrolled outbursts. The tussling between the two of them and the dissatisfaction with the final song even had some positive outcomes: in September 2009, a Stut choir arose out of the desire of actors in earlier Stut productions to stay involved with the organisation.<sup>27</sup> The video accompanying this chapter captures the birth of this singing group. Albert and Lien were the first to sign up, and Adrie joined them later the same year. Donna Risa explained recently to me that Bea had told Adrie about the choir: "In May 2010 they came up with the idea of doing a song about Adrie's unborn child Robin and earlier this year they wrote an anthem about poverty, called "The Euro Song". She wrote the lyrics herself and we've included it in the first Stut choir revue, *Coming soon! (Verwacht!)*, which is premiering in October 2012" (email, 19 September 2012).

27 Trainee Liesbeth van der Meij and former business manager Jan Rijnierse played important roles in setting up the Stut Choir. Rijnierse made contact with the musician Bam Commijs, who has been the choir's conductor since September 2009. *As it is in Heaven*, the American documentary about a choir of elderly people, was an important source of inspiration.

*Máxima's Coming!* marked the start of a new phase in Donna Risa's career as a community theatre maker. She looks back with some satisfaction on her first production with adults. She sees the project's main strengths as being its central themes and the fact that it succeeded in bringing out the dilemmas that these powerful personalities from Rivierenwijk are having to tackle. She admits that it could have been stronger artistically, recognising, for example, that she could have encouraged the designer to place less emphasis on the realism of the situation. "The stage design looks a little old-fashioned and, with hindsight, didn't really appeal to the imagination" (ibid.). This is part of the reason why in subsequent productions Donna Risa sought to produce less naturalistic forms of theatre. In *Girls' City* (*Meisjesstad*, 2007–2008) she experimented with life-size puppets, and then a few years later with physical theatre in *Ripples* (*Rimpelingen*, 2011). Meanwhile, during a turbulent period at Stut, she became the organisation's artistic director. In 2013 she will embark with a completely new team on a step-by-step exploration of which working methods best suit their target group, while never losing sight of Stut's founding philosophy, which remains inextricably bound up with the expression through drama of the dilemmas and authentic experiences of people from working class areas of Utrecht. Stut Choir clearly embodies the essence of community arts: the fostering of lasting relationships between artists and local people. It requires people with amazing tales to tell; a months-long search for balance, shared responsibility and the right artistic approach; a common adventure arriving at a professionally produced public event; and remarkable artists ready to invest all their creativity and vitality to enable a small group of ordinary people to connect and to express themselves as powerfully as possible through the medium of art. I now understand that in the case of Donna Risa and Stut, that art is so much more than the totality of activities within a single project, and is something which Kester, Kwon and Cohen-Cruz believe critics should take account of in their assessment. It encompasses far more even than all that took place from Bea's first phone call in May 2005 until the final performance of *Máxima's Coming!* on 28 February 2008 at the Stadshof in Vianen. It is the work of a lifetime.



***4. Expedition  
New West:  
Professional  
arts on a  
neighbourhood  
journey***



**With the help of theatre maker Femke Janssen, in this chapter I take a critical look back at the remarkable community arts project *Expedition New West (Expeditie Nieuw West)*. Janssen worked on this project in the Geuzenveld district of west Amsterdam in 2008 and 2009, together with a varying team. In May and June 2012 I attempted to piece together as complete a picture as possible of this project and formulate a balanced assessment of it. On 9 July 2012 she responded to what I had written with her own comments, which are included below in the form of undated quotes.**

The film accompanying this chapter, which was recorded on 4 September 2012, adds a third perspective. I should make it clear that the story of a community arts piece should never be the exclusive work of an individual researcher, a notionally neutral authority who interprets events and activities in which other people were far more intensely involved. This principle, which equally applies to previous and subsequent chapters, is inspired by the work of Wilkinson and Kitzinger. In *Representing the Other* these two groundbreaking feminist scientists advocate creating a level playing field for the interplay of research and “the other” (2009: 92). They in turn cite James Clifford’s introduction to *Writing Culture* (1986), in which he proposes that ethnographers, whose role is comparable to mine as a researcher, should endeavour to compile a “polyphonic” story, “which celebrates dialogue over monologue and polyphony over monophonic authority” (ibid.). I hope that a similar polyphony can also be heard in what follows.

### **The artist-researcher relationship**

The authors of *Cultural Interventions in Marginal Neighbourhoods (Culturele Interventies in Krachtwijken)* write that they “cannot unquestioningly assume that all socially committed artists working in communities and in multidisciplinary settings have mastered their work to an equal degree, and this is an issue ... requiring research carried out from the maker’s perspective in order to establish greater insight into appropriate methodologies” (Trienekens et al. 2011: 161). That’s easier said than done. After all, how can one ensure that this perspective is recorded objectively – is it even possible? As a researcher, one must in any case engage in an intensive relationship with artists. One should build up a relationship of trust with them that is at least as complex and demanding as the artist’s relationship with the participants and professionals involved in the project. The researcher decides from the outset to invest time, energy and creativity in an uncertain adventure, and that decision may be rooted in intuition, sympathy, recommendations by third parties, an artistically innovative plan for a project in a difficult neighbourhood, or an initial interview that convincingly conveys the intelligence, passion, energy and openness of the person or people initiating it. This makes for a relationship that develops equally from both sides, and although it may be less intensive than the artists’ relationship with their participants, it is no less unpredictable or challenging. “As an artist, you need to be able to trust

the researcher”, adds Femke Janssen, “It’s strange to have someone shadowing you so closely, because it makes you far more conscious of everything you say, and it makes you secretly scared of their opinion. On the other hand, as an artist you do sometimes want this person’s opinion, because he knows so much about what you’re doing.”

It’s unavoidable that the researcher will become a partner in the arts project. Your most important task is to record what the artists do, and where, why and how they do it. You gather information through in-person conversations or by telephone and email, and sometimes you give corrective advice drawn from knowledge gained in other projects for the international literature. The researcher has a moral obligation to provide an interim report, otherwise it would be too easy to score points by offering good advice after the fact. Jan Cohen-Cruz says that researchers who want to have the right to speak over the course of socio-artistic projects should be present on a regular basis, and not only turn up at the end with an attitude, as if to say, “That’s how I’d have done it”. In other words it could easily turn into a case of “a critic who does not know the work’s intention but nevertheless gets the last word” (2005: 116). She also thinks that “the critical writer needs to take in the multiple intentions of such a piece, the process that created it, and the context in which it functions, and then to decide how much to communicate the piece as intended by its makers to an audience of readers” (ibid.).

Cohen-Cruz believes that the first and foremost task is to document, which can be done by the artist or by an outsider. This is crucial if the work is to communicate with a broader field (ibid., 121). As well as through direct communication with the artists concerned, it is also possible to gather information from internal reports, audiovisual recordings, or personal observations based on experience of the work. The end product can be assessed using interpretive techniques borrowed from arts scholarship, as long as one does not forget that the snapshot assessment should always be placed in the context of what preceded it and that some criteria used by mainstream art criticism should be discarded – or some others should be added, because the goal of these projects is generally broader than solely achieving an aesthetic effect. And finally, it is a good idea to take a critical look back at the entire process a few months after its completion, together with the artists. In this case, we even repeated this three years later. The questions one should be asking as a researcher are these: How do you as an artist view this completed project through the prism of experiences gained in the intervening period? What did you learn from the project and incorporate in your current practice? What would you absolutely never do again, and what would you do again? Femke Janssen believes this is a valuable approach because, “Looking back from the perspective of the researcher helps the artist get a grasp on his or her own work.”

Femke Janssen’s participation in this critical review is courageous, because it would be fair to say that this project didn’t exactly go smoothly. It is precisely the combination of complexity, obstacles, difficult choices, and successful aspects of the project that make it worth closer examination. The rhetoric of many Dutch community artists is exclusively positive. More so than our Anglo-Saxon counterparts, they feel the need to protect their status in the art world establishment.



This is due in part to the Dutch arts education and funding systems, which still place the emphasis on individual, unique and autonomous authorship rather than a collective or anonymous authorship in which non-artists also have a stake. This attitude is undoubtedly influenced by weaker examples of community arts, which are not presented at their best or at their most powerful within a given form. Some people involved in community arts projects stress the good social intentions of their work, in order to preclude artistic criticism. Feeling aggrieved, they then turn inwards. Kate Crehan believes that this attitude is a remnant of a particular movement that dominated community arts in the 1980s and 90s, which “believed in simply handing over aesthetic control to the ‘community’ and letting them execute the art work even if they lacked the skills to do so. To such practitioners, essentially the only thing that mattered was the ‘modes of interaction’ with the ‘community’” (2012: 194).

*“Talking to local residents in Geuzenveld, it soon became clear that there was a much more urgent subject on their minds. The people were up in arms about all the urban regeneration going on.”*

Especially at the start of the project, *Expedition New West* appeared not to be prioritising interaction with the local community. The main focus seemed to be on the production of high-quality (according to mainstream criteria) socially engaged art intended to captivate and affect regular art audiences as well as members of the local community. Janssen believes this impression is unjustified:

It was definitely our intention to enter into dialogue with local residents and get them actively engaged in the expedition by organising a whole bunch of activities in a suitable building. Unfortunately, it took too long to find somewhere suitable. We actually shouldn’t have started without finding a place first.

The expedition’s aim of bringing together different art worlds and social groups meant it was carrying out valuable and pioneering socio-artistic work. It was also an antecedent to a model (the partially autonomously created art route in a deprived area) used in *Suburban Safari* (*Wijksafari*), which was produced by Adelheid Roosen’s company Female Economy in Sloterveer, an area adjacent to Geuzenveld. *Suburban Safari* was a national sensation in late spring 2012 (see also Van den Hoogen and Van Maanen 2011: 83–87).

### The background

After graduating in direction at the Amsterdam School of the Arts in 1997, Femke Janssen felt the need to present theatre to new audiences: “I also wanted to make theatre that arose out of reality, out of the stories of ordinary people, in order to make theatre accessible to everyone again – as it was originally meant to be.” And that’s why in 2006 she co-founded Public Amusement together with writer and dramaturge Fenneke Wekker. This organisation then developed the “expedition” concept.

*Expedition New West* is not mentioned in *Cultural Interventions in Marginal Neighbourhoods* but it would not have been out of place. The three enterprises that Trienekens and her team studied (a “cultural incubator” or *broedplaats*,<sup>28</sup> a radio station run by and for young people, and an arts project in vacant housing) were underway in more or less the same period in the same western area of Amsterdam, and they all shared similar socio-artistic aims. The activities initiated by *Expedition New West* activities were intended to invite local residents to “become more aware of the effect that the generation gap can have on the atmosphere in which we live” (Project plan 2008: 4). Public Amusement sought to achieve this by taking local residents on an eighteen-month expedition around their own neighbourhood. The subprojects that grew out of this process and the closing festival were to be a, “multifaceted and colourful reflection of an ‘arbitrary’ district of Amsterdam, which would open doors and present unheard voices to a broad audience” (Ibid., 2). One yardstick for the project’s success would be the “cultural projects of a permanent nature” that it initiated and which would continue under their own steam after the organisation had left the area. What followed was an energy sapping, fascinating, and instructive adventure during which characters, artistic visions, and ideals clashed; the micro level of artistic activity collided with the macro level of urban planning; artistic boundaries became entangled with social boundaries; and a project plan theory confronted the harsh practice of the reality of ordinary people being forced by the government out of their familiar environment and into an uncertain future.

Femke Janssen remembers that they very quickly realised they were going to have to rethink their ideas about using the generation gap theme:

Talking to local residents in Geuzenveld, it soon became clear that there was a much more urgent subject on their minds. The people were up in arms about all the urban regeneration going on. Many local people who’d been forced to leave their homes, were then unable to return because the rents had been raised. It seemed like their neighbourhoods have been taken over by architects and the newcomers who could afford these buildings. So we decided to change the aims of the expedition. The local residents needed a place where they could meet and say what they wanted to say. So we went looking for ways of setting up a cultural meeting centre.

Some organisations involved in *Expedition New West* were also involved in the projects studied by Trienekens and her team. They included the housing corporation and developer Far West; housing corporations Stadgenoot and Eigen Haard; Amsterdam West borough council; the socio-cultural district managers Koers Nieuw West, and a hub for social service provision, Dock. Whereas the more sociologically oriented *Cultural Interventions in Marginal Neighbourhoods* looked mainly at the convergence of local residents, artists and local administrative stakeholders, our story focuses primarily on the artists and the creative and organisational processes

<sup>28</sup> The Dutch term *broedplaats* refers to former industrial sites in lower income neighbourhoods where artists and high-tech innovators are given heavily subsidised studio space in the hope that they will give a creative and economic boost to the neighbourhood. It has been the catalyst for a boom in the creative industry, but, by and large, has led to less interaction with local residents than the initiators had hoped.

they attempted to launch, as well as their struggle with personal artistic ambitions and the contextual variables that made their work more complicated – often at the most inopportune moments. And so it was that the true art made in the course of this project was by no means all to be found in the final artistic product: Public Amusement's arts and culture festival that brought the expedition to a close on 24 April and 3 May 2009. No, the true art was to be found in the totality of activities, relationships and dialogues that developed over the entire 18-month process.

*“It was screened frequently following the festival to increase understanding of life in Vogelbuurt, and it brought urban poverty to the attention of policymakers.”*

The greatest single difference between *Expedition New West* and the projects studied in *Cultural interventions* was that it was conceived by artists who neither come from the area nor live in it. Two of the three projects examined by *Cultural Interventions in Marginal Neighbourhoods* (*Cascoland* and *UCee Station*) were initiated by community arts officers with good access to the local bureaucracy (Trienekens et al. 2011: 91 and 97) and the other, Garage Notweg “cultural incubator”, was run by the housing corporation Ymere (ibid., 88). From the outset, all of them were led by an intersectoral team consisting of local residents, researchers, artists, and representatives from housing corporations, social service providers and the municipal civil service. *Expedition New West* was not embedded or structurally supported in this way. The flipside was that this gave a greater degree of freedom, which allowed for the kind of experimental artistic research that was crucial to their enterprise.

Like many artists who feel drawn to community arts, domestically and internationally, Public Amusement was interested in creating the conditions for art production outside the art world establishment and in connecting mainstream audiences with groups that are seldom exposed to art (see Crehan 2012: 31–32). They set out their aims in their project plan: “We believe that a professionally produced performance or artwork can reach out to and confront both a broad, “inexperienced” audience and the artistic elite world in equal measure” (2008: 2–3). *Expedition New West* was not the first Public Amusement project to explore this artistic territory, because in 2006 and 2007 the organisation had used high quality art in an attempt to bring together residents of the wealthy Nieuwendammerdijk and poorer Vogelbuurt areas of North Amsterdam.

The mobile mini-festival *Expedition North* (*Expeditie Noord*) was part of the larger Over het IJ arts festival in 2007. The audience cycled from the main festival site to Vogelbuurt listening on headphones to stories about the history of North Amsterdam. When they got there, they left their bikes and continued on foot into the neighbourhood. Walking around the residential area, audiences saw professionally produced photographs of local people hung in front of sitting-room

windows. There were also site-specific single-act performances in a bakery and in a former sea captain's residence on the theme of social cohesion in the past (1947) and social distance in the present. These plays had been adapted from interviews with local residents for performance by professional actors. Another short production, entitled *Unheard North* (*Ongehoord Noord*), was performed by young local people seeking to readjust outsiders' preconceptions about Amsterdam, from the inside. *Expedition North* concluded with *50 Cent*, a documentary portrait of an eight-year-old boy growing up in poverty in the area (Bardoul et al. 2008: 4–5).

Public Amusement set off to Geuzenveld armed with the lessons learned in *Expedition North*. For example, there was dissatisfaction in North Amsterdam about the low turnout of neighbourhood audiences with a migrant background (which Public Amusement believed to be primarily the result of Over het IJ festival's policy of focusing ticket marketing on existing theatregoers) and about the limited increase of contact between the two target areas as a consequence of the project. “That's why in Geuzenveld we decided to focus more on long-term contacts and local activities”, adds Janssen.

Public Amusement sees *Unheard North* as one of the most successful components of *Expedition North*. This production gave rise to a youth platform that was still active in 2009. Janssen stresses that the film *50 Cent* also had lasting value for the neighbourhood: “It was screened frequently following the festival to increase understanding of life in Vogelbuurt, and it brought urban poverty to the attention of policymakers.” What's more, *Expedition North* had a demonstrable influence on the setting up of Museum Amsterdam Noord, a community exhibition space set up in part by local people in a former bathhouse in Vogeldorp. Janssen explains that these positive outcomes provided more than enough inspiration for embarking on similar socio-artistic explorations in Nieuw West and elsewhere in Amsterdam: “Public Amusement always planned to be active in the north, west, south and east of the city and to use those expeditions and the conclusions we drew from them to create increasingly focused projects in Amsterdam.”

When Janssen and her team set foot in Nieuw West for the first time it was not with a blank slate and they already had a pretty well-defined plan. Their ultimate aim was to create an art walk in Geuzenveld comparable to the one in *Expedition North*. Its combination of film, theatre and visual arts was intended to lead to permanent arts activities initiated and supported by local people. Public Amusement's first explorations in the area did lead the organisation to supplement its original focus on cultural and generational gaps with another subject: the gulf between the departing low-income residents and the wealthier newcomers.

From February to May 2008 the project leaders made their first contact with professional artists and official bodies in Nieuw West. They had also intended in this period to strengthen the team at an organisational level, but they were unsuccessful in this, Janssen remembers: “In fact the team was weakened by illness and overwork. We had to take on new people quickly and with hindsight you could argue that we didn't manage to get the right people in the right place and that that contributed to our not achieving all our goals.”

I visited the project exactly 20 times in the period from May 2008 to May 2009.<sup>29</sup> From September 2008, when three important figures in the organisation withdrew from the project for various reasons, my role changed from one of a relatively neutral observer to that of a more closely involved soundboard for Femke Janssen. This shift in position, which is not unusual in this field (see Trienekens 2011: 24; Cohen-Cruz 2010: 111–128; and Crehan 2012: xvi), made me a stakeholder. If I was to make any meaningful statements about it, I felt it was necessary to ensure that the project reached a satisfactory conclusion.

### **Expedition New West, week to week**

Early spring 2008 saw the start of an intensive search for institutional partners and pre-existing cultural activities in the neighbourhood. “That was the first step towards building up long-standing relationships with local people”, remembers Janssen:

We had already discovered that different generations felt there was a need in the community for meeting and artistic expression and that there were few places where that need was being met. What we did find was an activity centre for children and young people, a centre for the elderly, and Koggeschip, a locally active primary school that taught Dutch and computer skills to people from non-white migrant backgrounds. There was also a local council community centre which was used mostly for draughts-playing men.

On 16 April, Public Amusement had a promising conversation with a Moroccan youth worker from Dock social services organisation. He was working with a group he believed would be up for getting involved in participatory video and stand-up comedy. Public Amusement suggested getting Glen Faria involved in this part of the expedition, because he specialised in these fields. Six days later they met local civil servants, who warned them of “art project fatigue” among local people, and of competitiveness between artists – a phenomenon confirmed by Trienekens et al. (2011: 57). Martijn de Graaf from the municipal arts and culture department was the only person who was interested in the idea of creating a low-threshold cultural community centre in a vacant building. In this period, preliminary discussions were also held with Koers Nieuw West (the central body for social and cultural matters in this district) and artists who were involved to some degree with *Expedition North*. In early May discussions began with Jihad, Esmaa and Hajar Alariachi, better known as the TV trio De Meiden van Halal (Halal Girls). They were asked to make a light-hearted but critical film report about their own local area. “And to take a look at how urban redevelopment had affected them personally”, adds Janssen, “and compare how things used to be with how things are today.” Photographer Maarten van Schaik and writer Jesse Dijksman were commissioned to use interviews as the basis for a book of portraits of notable younger and older residents of Geuzenveld. And, finally, Femke Janssen herself would collaborate with playwright Fenneke Wekker on four short plays based

<sup>29</sup> The precise chronology of my research relationship with this project is as follows. In November 2007, CAL-Utrecht received an email requesting that we come and look at the documentation for *Expedition North*. Our first discussion took place on 14 January 2008. We subsequently agreed that CAL-Utrecht would follow the progress of the *Expedition New West* project. However, my teaching commitments and involvement in Rotterdams Wijktheater's International Community Arts Festival (ICAF) meant that I was only able to be physically present from April 2008 onwards. In the intervening period they emailed me the minutes of their weekly team meetings.

on interviews with urban developers, long-standing locals and new residents. The results of all these activities were to be presented at various locations in Geuzenveld as part of the festival.

*“We had already discovered that different generations felt there was a need in the community for meeting and artistic expression and that there were few places where that need was being met.”*

The first setback came to light at the production meeting on 14 May. In North Amsterdam, Public Amusement had learned how important it was to maintain visibility by organising activities in public. The plan had been that these would take the form of the Meiden van Halal filming their reports at various locations in the area, and the public rehearsals and try-outs for the monologues by professional actors. This turned out to be unfeasible because of the costs for extra hours and the fact that the professional actors were already booked up with other work for the coming year. Fortunately, the actors were still available for the performances at the closing festival, with the dates (24 April to 4 May 2009) being confirmed at this meeting. It meant that a physical base of operations took priority if the project was to have any kind of identity in the neighbourhood. “With hindsight, we should have made this a priority from the outset”, Janssen says:

We focused for too long on what seemed like a perfect vacant property on the Lambertus Zijlplein. After a long wait, it turned out that it was going to be turned into a shop after all. After that, we considered a mobile location or putting a mobile cabin on the square, but that looked like it was going to be too costly and too risky. It still took months before we could move into our Nolenstraat base.

On 15 May, Public Amusement found an unexpected municipal ally in Tim van Ruiten, head of social property management and liveability at Far West. He recognised the need for a cultural community centre in the area, one that would live on after the departure of the expedition. He explained that this was actually the task of Koggeschip, the local primary school that already had the necessary facilities, including a kitchen and a stage. This venue was considered unsuitable however due to the high rents it charged to outsiders, the sometimes poor coordination between the various users of the space, and the fact that the presence of a men's community centre adjacent to the school building formed an insurmountable obstacle for Muslim women. He therefore advised the organisation to approach ISH, an internationally renowned hip-hop dance theatre company with unfulfilled responsibilities in the community and surplus space in the former physical education academy building from which they operated at the edge of Geuzenveld. In September this turned out to be a wasted journey along a path ultimately blocked by various official bodies.

At the recommendation of Stichting Dock, at the end of May Public Amusement started discussions with Stadgenoot housing corporation, which had a branch office on the Nolenstraat, just behind the Lambertus Zijlplein. It emerged in these discussions that Stadgenoot owned an empty shop across the road from this office and they gave permission for Public Amusement to use the building free of charge. Koers Nieuw West expressed a willingness to provide €15,000 for preparing and furnishing the building so that activities could be organised there. The decision was taken to hold the opening party for this Cultural Living Room on 27 September, and Dijkman and Van Schaik's portrait book was to be launched on the same day. Their project based on interviews with local residents was well underway by July, although minutes from meetings at the time suggest that the quality of the texts was not yet satisfactory.

*“The positive reactions expressed by young and old alike, as well as their families, suggests that this section of the expedition was indeed successful in bridging intergenerational and intercultural gaps.”*

By late spring the production manager was already warning that the two days she had available would be insufficient to properly carry out all the work that needed to be done. As well as seeking support from organisations and local residents, and creating an ever-growing network of contacts that needed to be constantly maintained, there was the additional task of dealing with the artistic and organisational issues surrounding parts of the closing festival that still needed to be developed. One example was the need for extra funds for the Gould and Sylbing documentary. Meanwhile, preparations were in full swing for the “expedition lessons” at the primary school located in Koggeschip. These activities planned for early September were set to involve ten parents from Cordaan, a local home for the elderly. Despite the pressure on Public Amusement, everything seems to be proceeding well for taking over the Lambertus Zijlplein area with an array of cultural activities immediately after the summer.

In early September the challenges started mounting up. The general coordinator withdrew due to long-term illness, and the business manager and one of the artists themselves decided to partially withdraw from the project. In the meantime, the production manager had been replaced by an energetic newcomer who had more days at her disposal. She soon proved her worth in the hectic pace of changing events. (“Without her, nothing would have happened at all”, stressed Janssen later.) The expedition lessons at Koggeschip were about to get underway. External artists had already been contracted before the summer and the school had adapted its timetable for the purpose. To relieve the mounting pressure, the opening of the Nolensstraat was postponed until 25 October, but the book of stories and photographs would have to be ready before this date. Another issue was the urgent

need for someone with intercultural skills who could boost local support, a crucial task in this kind of project. Within just a couple of weeks, Janssen had succeeded in appointing just such a “community connector”, as well as an education officer. They were both thrown in the deep end, helping with the expedition lessons and sprucing up the organisation's Nolensstraat home. Their job was to get local people involved in the redecoration and to develop an attractive programme for the opening of the Cultural Living Room.

### **Expedition lessons at Koggeschip**

The expedition lessons were surprisingly successful. They reached out to children, young people, adults and the elderly from a variety of cultural and social backgrounds, and they came into being through a productive and reciprocal collaboration between teaching staff, artists, local residents, and official organisations (school, facilities for the elderly, and neighbourhood management). The lessons helped Public Amusement to penetrate deep into the community, creating a sense of momentum that the team was able to maintain until the end of October – but unfortunately not until the concluding festival in April 2009. The expedition went rather quiet in that dark season, surrounded as it was by depressing construction sites and the skeletons of half-built or half-demolished apartment blocks, and with a still overworked production team and artistic processes taking place without the direct involvement of, and out of view of, local people.

The expedition lessons suffered from none of these issues: the weather was no hindrance, they followed a well-conceived participatory method, activities took place out on the street or other highly visible locations, and meticulous progress was made in using art and other tools to bridge the gap between the generations. The lessons took place on five successive Thursday and Friday afternoons in September, with children in the upper three years at Koggeschip primary school going on an exploration of their neighbourhood together with professionals (including the community police officer and a city developer) and adult members of the local community. Accompanied by photographer Frederique Masselink van Rijn they took pictures of things they were interested in and visited the Cordaan residents in their private quarters and took portraits of them. They then wrote to these elderly people, establishing respectful contact that was highly valued by all involved.

On 25 and 26 September, Janssen and actress Laura de Boer led improvisation sessions with the children that resulted in several short dramatic scenes. The children took the roles of elderly people in these sometimes moving, sometimes funny sketches, performing them to an audience of fifty people (including nine of the elderly interviewees) at Koggeschip school. The same event also included an exhibition of the children's photos and the letters they had written to their older neighbours. (Later, this same material would also be exhibited for several days in the dining hall at Cordaan.) The positive reactions expressed by young and old alike, as well as their families, suggests that this section of the expedition was indeed successful in bridging intergenerational and intercultural gaps. Afterwards the children and the elderly people came to sit together. A local Surinamese woman by the name of Mrs Kleingard was presented with a bunch of flowers by a girl who had visited her home for tea. The young girl explained that she could



now “kind of imagine what it’s like to be old.” Another woman using a walking frame shuffled along the photos, pointing out one portrait and saying:

Look! His name was Andries. I talked about him and then one of them apparently put a photo of the photo of him that hangs on my wall. And now I’m seeing him here in the school. Wonderful. I’m really touched. I enjoyed the play too. I couldn’t make out much of it, but you understood what they meant. It shows they respect us, at home too. They wrote a lovely letter.

One boy wrote in his letter: “It was so beautiful in her house!” He liked it so much.

English speaker Mrs Gomez from St. Lucia agreed that it would be a good idea to have the children visit elderly people: “It’s company, you know. When you’re alone in a home like that it’s nice to have children come talk to you. It was wonderful. And it was nice that they put me in their pictures.”

Janssen wanted to maintain the children’s level of enthusiasm, following the advice of her education officer she decided to organise a talent contest for dancing, singing, and music. “In the end it was held on 30 January. The winners were two girls with a dance act, and they got to perform it at our closing festival.”

### The opening of 72 Nolensstraat

The following public event *Expedition New West* used to focus attention on Geuzenveld was the opening of 72 Nolensstraat on Saturday 25 October. The team had their work cut out for them in the week beforehand, getting the shop cleaned and furnished in time. Large numbers of children helped out, unprompted. On Saturday morning, the outside of the shop was still being painted by the children when “beambuzz”, a former fire department car converted by artists, went around the area loudly informing local people in Dutch, Berber and Turkish that the opening would take place later that day. Despite these efforts the turnout was disappointing – partly due to the chilly weather. There were approximately 50 people present when at 4pm Femke Janssen and author Jesse Dijksman presented the first copies of the specially made book about residents of Geuzenveld outside on the streets to the local residents who had been interviewed for the publication. The atmosphere was pleasant in this cultural living room, with its play corner and comfortable sofa. There was guitar music from Mr Drenthe, a Surinamese musician whose story was included in the book, and local women handed around their home-made snacks. Afterwards, around 20 people stayed behind for an animated conversation with the Arabic-speaking “community connector” to talk about possible activities they could organise in the former shop.

In the weeks following the opening of the Cultural Living Room, the energy gradually seeped away. Looking back, Janssen believes that this was because the team had to deal with too many issues at once:

We lost too much time on the negotiations with ISH that led to nothing. And our new team just wasn’t solid enough. We were working from our old office on the Kempenaerstraat, because the Nolensstraat place wasn’t safe enough, warm enough or well-equipped enough. It simply meant that we weren’t around enough in the neighbourhood.

That wouldn’t in itself have been too bad if the “community connector” had been more successful in keeping activities going at the Nolensstraat base. She did attempt to get things going with coffee mornings and play afternoons, but these efforts were not sufficient to start the intended long-term cultural initiatives operated by and for local people. Disappointed, in early February 2009 she pulled out of the expedition. A few weeks later her work was taken over by Cultural and Social Work students living in the same street. They transformed the shopfront windows into creative installations, organised a giveaway shop and helped two neighbour women to organise sewing activities as well as play activities for children. This has meant that the shop ultimately became one of the more successful and enduring parts of *Expedition New West*. At the time of writing, in autumn 2012, it is still operating.

*“It was important for us to work together closely with people from the local area, but that didn’t always go as smoothly as hoped.”*

The cold dark months before spring shifted the focus from the expedition to the subprojects, which were to be developed autonomously, and the growing logistical challenges involved in the closing event. They needed to organise permits and catering, and urgently to find a second venue for receiving the audience and carrying out daily production tasks. Venues also needed to be found for presenting the theatre monologues and documentary planned for the festival, and one important criterion was that all the venues could be included in a feasible festival route. On the artistic side they still needed to hone the final versions of the theatre scripts in two-week cycles with hired-in actors working under the direction of Femke Janssen. Janssen was also having to keep an eye on the two film productions, *Old but Bold (Flink Oud)* and *Meiden van Halal*, and an audio walking tour that would guide visitors through the neighbourhood. And she still didn’t have definitive confirmation about the youth theatre piece that Glen Faria was going to make.

The only activities that maintained *Expedition New West*’s visibility in the public realm in the winter months were occasional promotional “acts” at entrances to some of the more expensive new apartment blocks (in early December), a public show at the Christmas market and, from February onwards, the relaunch of the Cultural Living Room. Janssen remembers that these activities demanded a great deal of energy: “It was important for us to work together closely with people from the local area, but that didn’t always go as smoothly as hoped.” In March, however, there was a successful event in the Nolensstraat base involving actor Sinan Cihangir and local residents. In his monologue, Cihangir explained how much he missed his Turkish motherland and what he felt about Amsterdam Nieuw West, where he grew up. Janssen explains:

We wanted to show women who regularly came to the Cultural Living Room that it was possible to create story-based theatre that they could identify with. It confirmed that we were on the right path. Sinan later performed the same monologue in that centre next to Koggeschip, the one where the men are



always playing draughts. They were continually reacting to the content, so it turned into a conversation with the actor – the monologue turned into a dialogue. I couldn't understand any of it, though, because they were communicating in Turkish. It was something special for Sinan, although he had expected something like that could happen.

These informal try-outs confirmed to Cihangir and Janssen that both the content and artistic style of the scene they were developing would communicate with people who had no previous experience of theatre. And they would also increase local people's interest and involvement in the upcoming festival. The other dialogues were not tested in a local setting in the same way. Another highly visible and much appreciated part of the expedition were the huge prints of Frederique Masselink's photos of the meetings between young and old people from Geuzenveld, which were installed on the facade of the Lambertus Zijlplein shopping centre in 2009 – and which are still there at the time of writing, three years later.

### **Representation or self-representation?**

On 20 January I attended the first rehearsal of the *Kenau* monologue in an empty room in De Parkrand, a recently completed luxury apartment complex. I was struck by the way in which director Femke Janssen and actor Sinan Cihangir explored every line of the text in detail for its dramatic potential. The script had been written by Fenneke Wekker, and based on interviews with local residents. It concerns a young Turkish man who resists when being forced to move home, and it draws parallels between his actions and those of Kenau Hasselaer, who is reputed to have led the 16th-century Dutch beggars' revolt in Haarlemmermeer against the Spanish occupiers. In consultation with the author, Janssen and Cihangir collaborated on changing the tone of the piece from its politically charged original version, packed with historical facts, into a brisker dramatic text. "The way I saw it, it needed to be more about feelings", remembers Janssen:

Emotions were running high among local residents. They felt the housing corporations weren't taking them seriously. I decided to create more distance in the piece itself, because the venue and run-up to the scene were very much rooted in the real world: the audience were in a flat that the family had just been forced to move out of. There were portraits on the wall of people who were still going to have to move, and the audience had the opportunity to look at these before the performance. That's why I wanted to make the room the actor was in a more abstract space, so we came up with the idea of stacking removal boxes against the wall and on the floor, and that the actor should sit in a really small box that limited his movement. So the room became the theatre and the actor performed it with real emotion and it represented the story of the people who live there. It was a mix of reality and theatre.

Public Amusement permits itself greater freedom in this area than participatory community theatre groups such as Stut, whose scripts stay far closer to the original interviews (Bours and Hautvast 2006: 116). Stut works this way because it is presumably easier for local people to dramatise their own story onstage using their own accent and body language. This breed of community theatre maker also believes that a professional actor is less well equipped than a local amateur to



interpret the local person's story in an authentic way that will interest local audiences. Femke Janssen, on the other hand, is concerned that the poor acting skills of an untrained local person can undermine the potential impact of the narrative, especially for mainstream theatre audiences. "But the same goes for less experienced audiences, because the actor's skill is after all the ability to assume someone else's character while also keeping an appropriate distance from it, allowing the story to be shown at its best." Janssen believes that this combination of solid acting work and a script local people feed into but which the author ultimately defines can provide an opportunity for outsiders and members of the community alike to take a critical look at the place and its associated problems. In this regard Janssen was working more within a mainstream author's tradition, which Claire Bishop says is intent on provoking and challenging (2006: 11).

*"I want to help the actors express their dilemmas onstage in a tangible and compelling way. And wherever possible, it should also be multilayered, because in this art form too, I seek to create beauty and depth."*

In one case Public Amusement's claiming of artistic freedom led to a protest by one of the interviewees. She felt misrepresented by the script she was sent. Sheila Preston believes this is an ethical risk that is always lurking in the shadows when doing this kind of work: "Whether we are researchers writing about individuals, theatre makers constructing narratives and stories, or facilitators enabling people to write or perform their own stories, we have a responsibility towards ensuring that the representations that are made are produced through a climate of sensitivity, dialogue, respect and willingness for reciprocity" (2009: 65; see also Cohen-Cruz 2005: 89). The artist's own ideology and aesthetics often don't emerge in the interviews, and are only activated during the construction of the artistic material. Janssen views this as an inevitable component of artistic selection:

You leave certain things out in order to better convey the essence of the story. Some local people find that difficult because they feel you've left out too much. I do believe that if someone can't identify with the person they see in that essence, then you have to change the script. Our voice is heard through the craft that we know. Our skills relate to making art and theatre. We take our freedom in the form we choose when it comes to text and execution. But the local person should also feel their voice is being heard, and as an artist you have to be able to justify your decisions.

There are no unequivocal solutions to these dilemmas. After all, artists surely filter their interpretation of what the essence is of the story through their own ideology and aesthetics. But it could equally be argued that participatory community theatre makers also use filters, even if they tend to highlight the artistic aspects of their additions rather than ideological ones. Jos Bours writes: "Being of service to others

doesn't mean eradicating yourself. My talent, creativity and imagination are simply directed at something else. I want to help the actors express their dilemmas onstage in a tangible and compelling way. And wherever possible, it should also be multi-layered, because in this art form too, I seek to create beauty and depth" (Bours and Hautvast 2006: 116). The notion of an entirely neutral "passing on" of a story is an illusion, even when it comes to self-representation (involving a local resident telling his or her own story), unless there is absolutely no intervention from any external ideology, author, director or other mediating artist. And both Crehan (2012: 187) and Kester (1995: 6) have their doubts about the presumed altruism of community artists. It is not unusual for them to use their work in the community to promote their own artistic, political or moral agendas. Kwon has a more nuanced take on this issue. Rather than detecting a faux-altruism on the part of the artist, she sees the primary danger as emanating from the official institutions commissioning work. They have the tendency to reduce artists and local residents alike to stereotypes that can be more easily pigeonholed in policy plans (2004: 140–141). This insight is confirmed by Trienekens and her team (2011: 160).

### **The festival**

With the completion of the monologues, the *Expedition New West Art and Culture Festival* programme was more or less complete. By that time, the documentaries, audio tour and photo exhibitions were also ready. The only unknown, right up to day of the premiere, was the scene Glen Faria wanted to perform on the street with a small group of young local people. In mid-March, Eigen Haard housing corporation offered the expedition a second premises in the neighbourhood, at number 22 in the shopping arcade on Nicolaas Ruychaverstraat. "They were also having trouble reaching out to local people and wanted to foster better relations in this way", says Janssen, explaining their generosity. She and her team used this new home base to finalise the logistics for catering, designing the venues for the monologues, route planning, and publicity. It was also to serve as the venue for receiving the audience, staging the opening monologue involving a project developer, and screening the closing *Meiden van Halal* film. Unfortunately it proved impossible to get local people and businesses to supply the catering for the festival. So at the last moment the organisation brought in Willing Wheels, an experienced mobile festival kitchen operating from a former city bus. Despite being understandable from a practical perspective, this decision gives more weight to the conclusion that the expedition has not been sufficiently successful in engaging with the local community. Janssen traces this to the departure of the "community connector", which to her mind caused the resulting drop-off in attention being devoted to this crucial aspect of their work.

I spoke again with D. and her daughter at the supper on 24 April, having met them several times before at various expedition activities over the preceding months. They were living on the Nolensstraat, to the right of the Buurthuiskamer, and she had been actively involved at the coffee mornings, play afternoons and the giveaway shop ever since it opened in October 2008. The opening scene involved an actor playing the role of Pieter, a project developer. But D. didn't realise it was an actor and became genuinely angry with him, starting an argument with him. This caused hilarity among some of the experienced theatregoers forming the majority of the



roughly 70-strong audience that evening. It was not by any means the only occasion when local residents' relative unfamiliarity with theatrical convention came to the fore at the festival (see Crehan 2012: 17). This potential problem could have been picked up in the neighbourhood earlier, at least to some degree, if the process had been more participatory. All the same, it was a powerful moment of confrontation between two types of audience.

The second event on the festival schedule was also performed outdoors. The scene made by Glen Faria and two local lads named Ahmed and Abdullah, was acted out on the flight of steps next to Ruychaverstraat 22 and on the adjacent car park: a car skidding to a halt right in front of us, followed by a dialogue between the driver and a friend talking to him from the balcony. This comical and realistic piece into how young people view the changes in their local area made good use of the available public space – and because it was played out on the street, non-paying local people were able to watch too. For the ten or so minutes it lasted, this raw and effective form of drama created a productive fusion of different cultures that brought together the well-heeled inner city and the deprived suburb, and art and everyday reality.

For the remainder of the expedition the audience was split into small groups identified by colour. I accompanied D. and her daughter as we were guided around the area. Listening on headphones as we passed the photo portraits on Lambertus Zijlplein, we heard pieces of interviews with local people and professionals active in the area. Next, we watched the documentary *Old but Bold* at De Brug community centre on the Aalbersestraat, which I found to be a moving and amusing portrait of feisty elderly people living in the area. Everyone appearing in the film was present at the screening, as were a few Cordaan residents I knew from the expedition lessons. It made for an unusual atmosphere, with one's gaze constantly jumping back and forth between screen and audience members, who were also characters in the film.

We then moved on 500 metres to a luxury apartment in the Parkrand complex, where we watched a solo theatre piece about a girl called Marissa, who had recently moved in, and her doll Mina. It was technically clever, but the acting style, the design, and the fact that the nine-year-old girl is performed by an adult combined to create a sense of remoteness. D. and her daughter were not much impressed. Femke Janssen believes that their negative reaction had a more complex background:

We wanted to introduce the audience to the Parkrand housing complex, which many of the original occupants were pretty annoyed about. I was also taken aback by this totally misplaced architectural marvel, which people from all over the world were coming to visit by the busload. It didn't fit the area in any way, including the rent prices. New occupants there were discontented because lots of tenants were only there temporarily and many apartments stayed vacant for long periods. We originally intended to perform it in a real apartment – which would definitely have benefited the acting style and design – but Stadgenoot housing corporation withdrew approval at the last moment. They were concerned that it would disturb the occupants too much, although we'd already got permission from neighbours. So we ended up having to do the scene in a little



meeting room in the Parkrand. I agreed to it because otherwise other people from the neighbourhood wouldn't have had a chance to get to know the building at all and thus broaden their horizons.

After Marissa's scene we walked past the boarded up windows of a disused apartment block on the Ripperdastraat before entering through a dilapidated doorway into our next stop-off point. Our group of twenty was then led to a flat on the second floor. Hanging in the corridors and rooms were photos and family albums belonging to local people. D. and her daughter had a prominent place on the wall here, as did their Surinamese neighbour J. Specially for the occasion, photographer Myriam Missana had taken glamorous new portraits of them to accompany the snapshots. D. and J. had not seen them before, and were visibly moved on finding these images of them as part of this respectfully designed exhibition.

After this voyage of discovery around the flat our guide urged us to enter the only closed room. In the middle of the floor we saw a removal box, and everyone in the audience found a place to stand against the wall; we could see through the window that it was getting darker outside. Suddenly the box opened as Cihangir popped out his head. He was hugely empathetic in his role as a contemporary multicultural rebel. Blending historical references to the rebellious Geuzen with effective doses of emotion, he took his audience on a journey into the past. Along the way he pointed out the causes of his current frustrations, most of which were caused by his impotent grief at the forced departure of his parents from the house they had lived in since coming from Turkey in the 1970s, to move into their new home. He ended his story by resolving to use the flat we were in to take a do-or-die stand against encroaching development. D. nodded approvingly several times at this authentic character's words, and the locals and the theatre aficionados were equally affected by the performance. This time everything fell into place: the contextualising effect of the photo exhibition, the site-specific venue, and this particular actor who knows the area well and is well-known within the community.<sup>30</sup>

As we walked back to the start of the route, D. poured her heart out about her own compulsory re-housing. She had been deeply touched by the story told by the young Turkish man, who, like her, was born in the area she was so deeply attached to through her own children. We returned to the Ruyschaverstraat where at around 9.30pm the evening was brought to a close with the documentary by the Meiden van Halal. This popular trio of Moroccan girls took us on a light-hearted trip down memory lane with anecdotes about people and places in the neighbourhood where they grew up and to an extent still live.

### In search of meaning

As I explain elsewhere in this book I believe that community arts projects should be assessed on the basis of the entire process, rather than a single performance or event. *Expedition New West* lasted a full eighteen months, not just those three and a

half hours on a balmy spring evening in 2009. In that time almost 30 children and ten rather isolated elderly people were brought together in a meaningful way through the medium of art, and at least as many people at the Cultural Living Room on the Nolensstraat got actively engaged with the arts. Different generations of local people gained a face and a voice through the *Portraits of Geuzenveld* (*Portretten van Geuzenvelders*) photo and story book, photo exhibitions, participatory and professional stage performances, films and an audio piece. The expedition succeeded, temporarily at least, in creating a lively cultural centre run by local people themselves. And finally there is the permanent visual reminder of the project in the form of huge photos hanging above the shopping arcade on the Lambertus Zijlplein. A total audience of 270 people walked the festival route over its eight editions and 84 of them came from the local area. While it's true that these figures are lower than Public Amusement had hoped for, the event did produce the intended level of synergy between local people and visitors from outside the area. Janssen believes that this was largely due to the inclusion of the winners of the talent competition held in January: "They'd taken part in our first performance and everyone in the area knew that they were going to appear one more time at the end, and that attracted lots of locals."

*"Local people simply couldn't commit long-term to our enterprise. They were no longer open to new things in the area. They were paralysed."*

In her book *Local Acts* Cohen-Cruz assembles several useful criteria for assessing community arts projects, a term she sees as also encompassing autonomous, conceptual models such as *Expedition New West*. She does believe that local residents should play a major role in this kind of project, "but don't necessarily have to be on stage, or holding the paint brush" (2005: 88). One of her criteria is mutual nourishment and challenge. Participants experience what it is to transform ideas into artistic forms. This enables them to fantasise, to think about their existence and to present themselves positively to the public. In turn, artists benefit from associating intensively with people who have different life experiences than they do (Ibid., 93–94). Reciprocal nourishment and challenges demonstrably formed a part of *Expedition New West* but except in the case of the expedition lessons the artistic processes lacked transparency and were too autonomous to allow local residents to develop a true sense of co-ownership. Janssen believes that other aspects played a role in this specific location as well:

Local people simply couldn't commit long-term to our enterprise. They were no longer open to new things in the area. They were paralysed. And the fact that many women had nowhere to leave their children made it impossible for them to join the festival. There was also an invisible audience that wasn't included in the visitor numbers, because a large number of elderly people saw *Old but Bold* but didn't join in to see the rest of the festival. *Meiden van Halal* was also screened on the square in front of Koggeschip. At least fifty people watched there. The photos on the square could be seen by everyone. We put our booklet

<sup>30</sup> D. and her daughter recognised Sinan Cihangir from the popular reality soap *West Side* broadcast by the Amsterdam channel AT5.



Portraits of Geuzenveld through the doors of homes throughout the neighbourhood. So the expedition reached a lot more people than it may appear at first sight.

Cohen-Cruz makes a distinction between the initial creative process phase during which material flows from local people to the artists, and the second phase when artists take that material and transform it “into something that can be articulated to an audience that was not part of the creative process” (ibid., 99). Following this train of thought, one might conclude that *Expedition New West* didn’t adequately connect these two phases: no mainstream arts audiences were invited to participatory events such as the presentation of the expedition lessons, the opening of the Nolensstraat and encounter with Cihangir, while the local people of Geuzenveld felt less welcome at the concluding festival. Nonetheless, several parts of the festival did satisfy more general artistic and social quality criteria that Cohen-Cruz believes all community arts must comply with: the project presented art with a refreshing and unusual perspective, it was emotionally moving, and offered an alternative view of reality; and on a social level, it brought diverse groups together, broke stereotypes, and gave participants a voice and a face in the public domain (ibid., 118).

An important lesson that Janssen herself learned from *Expedition New West* is how essential it is to build flexibility into this kind of project (with respect to time, budget, team-member characters, and project plan) if you want to take advantage of any momentum built up. To do this, you need a relatively open plan and a level of commitment and social skill that not all artists possess. Cohen-Cruz points out that you should never underestimate the work or believe that you can simply repeat something that may have worked in another context (2010: 150). The content, organisation and budget of *Expedition New West* appeared to be heavily weighted towards the closing festival, which closely resembled *Expedition North* in setup, and used conventional, mainstream artistic working methods. Janssen disagrees with this interpretation: “We wanted to get out into the community much more and we put people onto it, it’s just that we didn’t succeed on a practical level to realise those plans. That’s a very different thing.”

Moments when the potential was perhaps underexploited include the children’s play at Koggeschip and the opening of the Cultural Living Room. Sinan Cihangir’s try-out there might have served a similar purpose, but Femke Janssen explains that, “He hadn’t been hired to do that. These are things I’ve found out since. An actor presents something to the group and can take it from there to make something with the group” (interview, 2 June 2009). This is something that demands flexibility and the courage to let some projects go, so there’s space for new possibilities. But Janssen realises that, “This can be problematic for funding organisations who want to see you deliver what you promised. And you can’t suddenly let people down who you’ve made agreements with about contributing to a subproject and then tell them there’s no work for them. In that case you’d need to start from another basis right from the start.”

With hindsight, Femke Janssen recognises that she did perhaps stick too rigidly to the project plan. But even if she had worked in a more collaborative way, in this specific locality where there was so much bitterness, it still would have been a difficult task. Even so, *Expedition New West* can justifiably be described as a pioneering socio-artistic expedition. It encountered all kinds of challenges that can beset any concept-driven community arts enterprise incorporating a large measure of autonomously designed art. Undoubtedly, Public Amusement continued for too long working with preconceived but insufficiently trialled ideas imposed from outside the area – from the office in Kempenaerstraat – and with too little involvement from local trailblazers. And the team lacked previous experience in running a collaborative arts project in a similar dysfunctional locality. However, this project did generate valuable encounters involving artists, different generations of local people, newcomers and mainstream theatregoers. And parts of the closing festival were both socially and artistically effective. Three years later the visible legacy of *Expedition New West* – the giveaway shop on the Nolensstraat and the photos on the Lambertus Zijlplein – mostly possess purely symbolic value.

*“In its original form, Ancient Greek drama was intended to achieve a similar effect: identify the problem, present it to the audience and then discuss it together.”*

On a personal level, Femke Janssen now sees this adventure as being first and foremost very instructive: “It’s now clear to me how you should not go about it. It was just very difficult in this area.” She has lost none of her enthusiasm for this work, however:

If the arts want to have a core function in our society, then this kind of project is vitally important. In its original form, Ancient Greek drama was intended to achieve a similar effect: identify the problem, present it to the audience and then discuss it together. If art means little to the vast majority of people or to the government, then we as artists can only plant seeds now and hope that the benefits will be reaped later. I believe this means investing in communities and areas where art is not a part of everyday life, and using art to reflect with local people on what’s going on around them. I would recommend taking a lot more time for this process, primarily in order to deepen the contact and the effect of encounters. I also believe that it is useful to enter a neighbourhood as a “tourist” and to make art there with a certain sense of openness and objectivity. Funding cuts mean that art will once again have to demonstrate its usefulness in new ways. And it will only emerge from where the need is strongest – from the artist and from local people. Amsterdam remains a challenging city when it comes to realising this kind of project, because its 177 nationalities bring the world together here, but we still don’t know enough about each other, or know each other well enough. The major new IJburg development in Amsterdam is an exciting area in this regard: there’s plenty of dazzling architecture but the people living there are unhappy. I just can’t wait to get started again.



***5. Chasing  
the dream of  
community  
opera in  
North Utrecht  
with YO!***

**Community arts and opera are not fields of the arts that you would immediately associate with one another. In this chapter, however, taking Utrecht's Yo! Opera company as my reference I will explore how between 2005 and 2010 these two apparent opposites became fruitfully entwined. In the video we have made to accompany this chapter, Yo! contributor Debora van Stenis-Patty gives her perspective on this period.**

To frame the topic more broadly I will first draw on the work of theatre historian Oscar Brockett. He explains that Western opera originated at the end of the 16th century in Florence as a form of entertainment for the local nobility. From 1637, when the very first opera house was built in Venice, this art form also became more accessible to a wider public (1995, 128). In the 17th and 18th centuries, opera spread from Italy throughout Europe, where it remained a pastime principally of the aristocracy and the well-to-do. Brockett estimates that during this period around 20,000 libretti were written by Italians alone (ibid., 272). The Dutch counterpart to Brockett's work, *The History of Theatre in the Netherlands (De Theater-geschiedenis der Nederlanden)*, has virtually nothing to say about opera in the Netherlands (Erenstein 1996). Only from an obscure Internet source can one discover that the first Dutch opera house, inspired in its design by the one in Venice, opened its doors in 1681, only to close again less than a year later (Jansen 1999). Since then opera in the Netherlands has indeed had a permanent presence, but it has chiefly remained the province of an elite audience, and in recent years a rapidly dwindling one.<sup>31</sup>

It is the development of community opera in particular that is of chief importance within the context of this book. My attention was first drawn to this surprising phenomenon when in the second half of 1997 I documented a large-scale community arts project in an underprivileged neighbourhood of Sydney, Australia (Van Erven 2001: 206–242). The well-known composer Richard Vella was involved as curator of the musical component for this project, entitled *Trackwork*. At the time he was artistic director of the avant-garde company Calculated Risk Opera Company, but he had no problem at all in working with young Aboriginal and Pacific Island rappers. To me Vella represented a refreshing form of crossover, which I have since come to see as characteristic of the Australian arts world. Compared to their European counterparts, mainstream artists there are much less afraid that involvement in community arts will harm their reputations. Other singers in *Trackwork*, which was performed in moving trains and in and around railway stations, included a Laotian refugee, an Italian women's choir and two professional opera singers. *Trackwork* thus opened my eyes to hybrid forms of community arts, in which hardcore neighbourhood theatre gained a position of equal merit alongside contemporary dance, avant-garde performance

31 This is evident from trend analyses by the Netherlands Institute for Social Cultural Research (SCP) covering the period 1995 to 2007. See Breedveld and Van den Broek 2001, 106; Van den Broek et al. 2009, 49; and Van den Broek 2011, 198–200.

art and opera. In Australia a great deal of water has already flowed under the bridge between community arts and the regular arts sector – in the Netherlands we are still building just such a bridge, brick by brick (see Binns, Fotheringham, Hawkins, Reid and Watt).

Once we were into the new millennium I discovered other forms of community opera in Europe that were even more explicitly participatory. One of the most striking examples is Streetwise Opera, a British company which has been making operas with homeless people since 2000. The production *Songs for Silenced Voices* by Collective Encounters, which I saw performed in vacant shops in Liverpool, also falls into this category. There are also amateur productions or educational experiments by regular opera companies that label themselves as “community opera”. Blackheath halls in London, Glyndebourne Youth Opera in East Sussex, Neukölner Oper in Berlin and the Dutch company Dario Fo (based in Poeldijk, close to The Hague) could also be added to this list. To me, however, the closest equivalent was Yo! Opera.

In a theoretical sense, the community work by Yo! falls into the category of “community music”. David Elliott, Lee Higgins and Kari Veblen, the three initiators of the *International Journal of Community Music*, define the phenomenon as follows:

- (a) music-making situations that occur outside university music departments; or, (b) partnerships of outreach programs between schools and professional music organizations (e.g. symphony orchestras). These two views are accurate as far as they go, but they do not begin to capture the full depth and breadth of what community music is today (2008, 3).

Veblen defines community music as always involving active participation in the creation and performance of music. Other key characteristics include broad and easy access for everyone and the principle that social aspects are at least as important as artistic ones (2008, 6). In the same article she also outlines existing scholarly research into community music, which began in 1994 and has since spread all over the world (ibid., 9–16). Higgins adds that community music is often about breaking down the distinction between the performing musician and the spectator by, “[challenging] the status of the individual artist [and] actively eroding the dominant notion of artist as genius” (2008, 25). He sees community music chiefly as an alternative movement beyond the realm of the arts establishment. Yo! Opera operated within this realm principally in order to liberate song and opera from within, but it also often explored the margins in working-class neighbourhoods and schools. This aspect of its work, which is a perfect fit with the definition above, is the focus of this chapter.

Coming from Utrecht, I had a superficial awareness of the first Yo! festivals in 2001 and 2003, but at the time I was too busy making my own productions for young people at the University College Utrecht and, I must confess, I had too many preconceived ideas about opera to believe that anything involving this art form in the theatre could constitute “real” community arts. Between June 2004 and July 2006 I lived and worked in the Netherlands Antilles, so I also missed

the third Yo! Festival, in 2005. But after that I could no longer avoid it. For our first community arts festival and symposium (ICAF) in November 2006 we wanted to profile different forms of participative performing arts from the Netherlands and abroad, and Rien Sprenger insisted that I should also devote attention to Yo!. So I set off with my video camera to learn more about this organisation and its approach. This marked the start of a frank and open research relationship that continued until mid-2010. It centred on three productions: the opera *Pit* (*Kuil*) (2006), *Opera Flats 2* (*Operaflat 2*, 2007) and *Opera Flats 3* (*Operaflat 3*, 2009). These projects, which from an artistic and methodological perspective elaborated on previous Yo! Productions, *Water* and *Opera Flats 1* (both 2005), took place at the interface of arts education, community arts and contemporary opera in public space. I discovered that while the level of participation increased year on year, Yo! was always cautious about involving local residents.

*“I often have very clear plans or ideas, but I try to throw it open. That’s a very different form from community arts projects in which you work for months in a location.”*

In the broad and highly diverse spectrum of the community arts landscape in the Netherlands, the three editions of *Opera Flats* moved very cautiously away from what I have sometimes mockingly described as the “soft-core” side to take a more radical approach. In soft-core community arts, professional artists typically develop the artistic concept beforehand, leaving only limited room for participation. The final design and the most important methodological, organisational, process-related and artistic decisions are taken by professionally trained artists. Hard-core community arts projects, on the other hand, aim to achieve true co-ownership and shared artistic control between artist and non-artist. In the ideal scenario (as in the case of *Maxima’s Coming!* in the Utrecht district of Rivierenwijk) residents in a community invite the professionals to develop an arts project, with nothing set in stone in advance. The starting points from which the art develops are the location, the residents, the themes relevant to participants and the existing parameters of the cultural context. Both the soft-core and the hard-core approach have their own merits and present their own specific challenges. Following his interactive *a capella* recital *The Air We Breathe* composer Merlijn Twaalfhoven described his unique position between these two poles as follows:

I make music but I do try to involve as many people as possible. But yes, it is true art. Take this evening for instance: the audience is the community; the auditorium made it work as it did. But ultimately I compose it. So I *am* also an artist. It’s not that I leave everything to other people. I know that some artists give a lot of responsibility to the participants. I often have very clear plans or ideas, but I try to throw it open. That’s a very different form from community arts projects in which you work for months in a location (ICAF film interview, Rotterdam, Saturday 2 April 2011).



Singers and audience members during a performance of *Opera Flats* on Faustdreef in Utrecht's Overvecht district. Photo: Anna van Kooij, 2007.



Claire Bishop puts it differently. She distinguishes between opposing forces within community arts. One she describes as an authorial tradition, which challenges participants to think about their positions and opinions. The other moves away from simple authorship towards collective art making. The one attempts to upset or undermine a status quo, while the other builds and improves (2006, 11). Here she is not saying that the latter is conservative. Kester makes a comparable point when he writes:

This assumption of the intrinsically repressive nature of the collective experience and the necessarily redemptive power of individuation is a staple of contemporary art theory and criticism. I contend that collaborative and collective practices can also generate new insights and transform subjectivity, not through the presentation of a spectacular event (an image, performance, installation, or object created a priori and set in place before the viewer or audience) but through the haptic and verbal exchanges that unfold in the process of collaborative production itself (2008, 171–172).

### Conflicting ambitions

The development of Yo! Opera in the direction of increasing participation was hampered in the case of *Opera Flats* by three ambitions which sometimes stood in each other's way. Artistic director Anthony Heidweiller wanted to inspire music students studying composition and singing to create a different kind of opera in unusual contexts and at the same time challenge their college tutors and departments to be innovative. In my view his main aim was to emancipate opera by making the art form more popular and more socially engaged. For this reason he also wanted to get pupils and students in primary, secondary and tertiary vocational education from culturally diverse underprivileged neighbourhoods actively involved in the process. This interest had its origins in the concept of "creative partnerships", which had made its way over from England: a process heavily reliant on government funding in which schools work together with an artist to stimulate children's creativity within a well-defined and easily assessable system (see Ofsted 2006, Durbin et al. 2010 and Creative Partnerships 2012). Finally – possibly encouraged by the increasing hype in the Netherlands around community arts, along with a genuine desire to bring opera into local communities – Heidweiller wanted to produce these projects in working class neighbourhoods.<sup>32</sup>

Looking back at the Yo! projects that CAL-Utrecht followed closely, the desire to encourage music conservatories to innovate was demonstrably the strongest of the three. The infectious enthusiasm Heidweiller had taught guest classes at music colleges many for years, enabling him to build firm relationships with these institutions, particularly the Lifelong Learning in Music department in Groningen (Renshaw 2011). Our own comparative study shows that partly for this reason the music students involved in 2009 were significantly more enthusiastic than those

in 2007 (Versloot 2011, 41–52). The professional support by experienced composers and theatre directors which Yo! arranged for them may well have played an important motivating role. To further stimulate cooperation with regular schools, in 2005 Yo! Opera assigned Debora van Stenis-Patty the task of strengthening relations between Yo! on the one hand and the teachers and pupils of schools and colleges in Utrecht on the other. Over the years she increasingly took the role of facilitator, growing to become the hub at the centre of every aspect of Yo!'s community operas. She speaks at length about her experiences in the video accompanying this chapter.

### Opera Flats 1 and Water

The first edition of *Opera Flats* in 2005 was more of a site-specific opera than community arts per se. Debora van Stenis-Patty remembers that the initial intention was to persuade professional and amateur opera singers to take part unpaid:

This drew only a few responses. Eventually we threw it open completely. Anyone who wanted to sing could apply. So on the day we had jazz quartets, crooning duos and musical storytellers alongside opera singers. The repertoire they sang consisted of well-known popular work (personal email, 7 December 2012).

For the residents of the flats on Faustdreef it was only a matter of allowing the use of their front door for a couple of hours on the afternoon of Saturday 5 November. It should be noted that while Faustdreef (Faust Lane, named after Gounod's opera *Faust!*) might lie in the underprivileged neighbourhood Overvecht, it is by no means the roughest street in the area. The flats are relatively spacious and are in the free sector rather than being social housing, with the consequence that most of the residents are elderly people with an ethnically Dutch background or young adults with a double income. To put it negatively, you could say that in 2005 Faustdreef functioned as an "exotic" backdrop to mini-operas conceived outside of the context and performed for a typical festival audience. The residents of the flats and the neighbourhood had nothing to do with the creation and production of the mini-operas in the doorways. Thematically the production was also unrelated to the context in which it took place.

In terms of community arts, a Yo! project in 2004 and two other productions in the 2005 festival were considerably more interesting. The first, *Opera from the Heart* (*Opera uit het hart*), consisted of 30 mini-operas each lasting three minutes, which were performed on the Cultural Sunday event of 2 May in various shops in the Hoog Catharijne shopping centre by professional opera singers together with a few school children. The libretti were written by pupils of the Jenaplan primary school in Utrecht's Witte Vrouwen district. They received coaching from writer Susanne van Lohuijzen.<sup>33</sup> The second was *Opera on the Bus* (*Opera in de bus*), a project led by Jos Zandvliet, formerly of Dogtroep (see Chapter 2). It featured local public transport drivers performing as singers, and buses serving as mobile

32 Heidweiller's ambition was shared by Saskia van de Ree, Yo!'s general manager, who from the start played a very active role in the development and execution of all these ideas. During CAL-Utrecht's first symposium, *Whose Play is it Anyway?*, she explicitly referred to the British creative partnership model as an inspiration for Yo!

33 This information is based on text from Yo! Opera's online archive, which states that Yo!, "sought to associate itself with the trend of Community Arts which had made its way over from England" ([www.yo-opera.nl/projects/opera-uit-het-hart/1529](http://www.yo-opera.nl/projects/opera-uit-het-hart/1529)). The 2005 festival was entirely devoted to community arts, as was the accompanying expert meeting ([www.yo-opera.nl/projects/expert-meetings/1546](http://www.yo-opera.nl/projects/expert-meetings/1546)).



locations for mini-operas. “That was about a lot more than just music”, Anthony Heidweiller recalled in 2007: “People went to each other’s birthdays and weddings. It was also a social thing” (film transcript, 11 May 2007).

The setting for *Water* (2005) was the wastewater treatment plant on Zandpad in Utrecht’s Overvecht district. Matthias Konecny and Paul Oomen composed the music, Ruben van Gogh wrote the libretto, and Anthony Heidweiller was the director. Heidweiller also came up with the idea of having children from the nearby Rietendakschool, a primary school in the Ondiep district, take part in the performance. They were each given precise directions (moving from A to B, delivering short pieces of text or making sounds), but other than that they had little creative input. Halfway through the process Paul Oomen realised that the makers had missed a golden opportunity to inspire the children and get them participating far more actively. Heidweiller agreed with him, but was unable to turn the tide because by this time the production schedule was set and it was no longer possible to deviate from it.<sup>34</sup> However, he did pursue the idea – one with which he had already experimented in 2004 in *Opera from the Heart* – in the subsequent project, *Pit*.

A later interview with Marike Wienia, who was at the time a teacher at the Rietendakschool and contact person for the project, suggests that *Water* actually had a more positive effect than the previous paragraph might suggest:

At that first meeting I well remember how Anthony said, “What we really want is for children who think artists are a different kind of people to realise that what artists do is a part of everyday life.” At the time I thought, “Well, good luck to you!” But it did work, because children in the schoolyard now say “Hi Anthony!” when they see him coming. An added benefit for the children was that they had a major experience of success. They were really the stars (personal interview, 11 October 2006).

In the same conversation Wienia pointed out how many parents – people who would otherwise never have gone to an opera – had come to see their children perform. In the same period the school had reserved lesson time for the topic of water pollution, and it gained an extra dimension through the children’s introduction to a working wastewater treatment plant. *Water* was the beginning of an enduring creative partnership between Yo! Opera and the Rietendakschool which continued until mid-2010 (Trienekens 2009).

#### **Pit (2006)**

Buoyed by the Rietendakschool’s enthusiasm and stimulated by Paul Oomen’s inspiring remark, Yo!’s artistic directors decided to involve children in the final two years of primary education more actively in its next project. On 14 and 15 October 2006 the national youth theatre workshop Het Lab was going to be putting on a festival about the relationship between people and animals.

<sup>34</sup> Oomen and Heidweiller made these remarks during the CAL-Utrecht symposium *Whose Play is it Anyway?* at neighbourhood arts centre Cultuurhuis Stefanus, Overvecht, on 24 November 2006.



The organisers of the event, entitled *Young Livestock (Jong Vee)*, asked Yo! to make a short opera about extinct species. The music itself was composed out of the children's view by Thomas Myrmel based on a libretto by Ruben van Gogh. The 31 participating pupils did, however, work with visual artist Jake de Vos on plaster footprints of extinct animals that they had chosen themselves. In the same period the children created a soundscape and an interactive computer installation, under the guidance of the young Polish composer Wolny Zbigniew, Debora van Stenis-Patty and writer Ruben van Gogh. This incorporated sounds of "their" animals (which they had conceived themselves), a song and their own poetry.

*"If the pupils saw themselves as the publicly recognised authors of the opera libretti, the reasoning ran, a much stronger sense of ownership would develop."*

We published a video report of this process on CAL-Utrecht's website, because we also wanted to make community arts visible during the development of the work.<sup>35</sup> Somewhat controversially, this film ends with the response of a disappointed pupil who had not been able to find his poem (or hear his voice) in the computer installation. However, his remark did not mean that the majority of the children had not enjoyed the performance or the process that preceded it. But we did want to raise the delicate topic of co-ownership. The excerpt illustrates how important it is to take care in dealing with the efforts and feelings of participants in community arts projects. And it shows the desire of many participants to play a visible role themselves in public presentations.

The Rietendakschool has relatively many pupils whose parents do not have Dutch as their mother tongue. The artists who facilitated the poetry writing workshops for *Pit* insufficiently aware of this. The result was that their assignments were too abstract, too complex or too openly formulated for the language level of the pupils. There was also too little time (only three short lessons) to tackle this serious challenge. And, just like with *Water*, there was relentless time pressure: the work with the school children had only started in the first week of September while the show was firmly set to open on 13 October.

Very tight production schedules are a common shortcoming of Dutch community arts projects. Many organisations – including full-time neighbourhood theatre companies – work according to production models adopted from the regular arts world. These are not always well suited to the "slow art" that community arts

demand.<sup>36</sup> This was a recurring issue in all the community projects we followed at Yo! Opera. In terms of artistic processes and production dynamics it was a relatively conventional arts organisation, which was not specialised in community arts. It only operated in this field periodically. The organisation was thus principally designed for the rapid creation of innovative workshop productions with young professionals. It was hard to let go of this rhythm for participative projects that – certainly when young children are involved – need to be able to set their own pace.

In the case of *Pit*, the children's contribution was too brief to make a lasting impression. Furthermore, the professionals (who were themselves under intense time pressure) had worked on the material out of the children's view. This considerably limited the pupils' sense of ownership. Also, the original idea was to present *Pit* and its accompanying installation in Ondiep so that the children's parents could come and see it, but this had to be abandoned due to lack of time and money.

During the design phase of *Pit*, the sensible suggestion was made to set up digital communication between professional artists and pupils to overcome a number of objections relating to co-ownership, as described above. The idea was that pupils would be able to ask the makers questions via email or webcam and receive explanations online about how the artists were working with the material they had generated. However, the organisational and technical facilities that this form of communication requires were underestimated. The computers at the Rietendakschool were too slow and the teachers were insufficiently prepared for the idea. The plan's devisers had not taken into account the extent to which a primary school will prioritise its regular curriculum. The plan for an interactive web environment was not dispensed with permanently, however, and it was reactivated with greater success in 2009 during *Opera Flats 3*, partly inspired by the experience with *Opera Flats 2* in 2007.

### Opera Flats 2 (2007)

As with *Opera Flats 1* the concept for the second edition was to present mini-operas in the doorways of the flats on Faustdreef. The recruitment of residents took place in February and March. To draw additional attention to the project, Anthony Heidweiller, accompanied by a professional accordionist, gave a spirited recital that included an aria from *Figaro* on the afternoon of Saturday 7 April.

This time the creative partner chosen was the nearby Grote Trekdreef primary school in Overvecht, with its high proportion of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds. Because the writing process at the Rietendakschool had run into such difficulties, this time a different approach was devised. If the pupils saw themselves as the publicly recognised authors of the opera libretti, the reasoning

<sup>35</sup> This video can now be seen at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwXgQKH0Yw4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwXgQKH0Yw4). Additional material from *Pit* can be found on the accompanying DVD.

<sup>36</sup> Neighbourhood theatres such as Stut and RWT aim to make two or three new productions a year. Their premiere date is also scheduled well in advance, as are a number of the performance dates. This is the result of standards derived from general arts funding regulations which also apply to community arts, and which primarily focus on audience numbers. Neighbourhood theatres still generally follow the model of regular theatre companies when it comes to structure, pace of production and performance planning, although this is gradually beginning to change.



ran, a much stronger sense of ownership would develop, and the pupils (and their family members) would be more likely to feel welcome to attend the performance on 3 November. To avoid repeating the overly abstract approach used for *Pit*, this time the writing teacher worked closely with a drama teacher, who tried to stimulate the children's imaginations with drama games. More time was also scheduled for work on the writing process, although again in practice this turned out to be less than would have been desirable. In the end there were six writing sessions.

In the early evening of 7 May 2007, I reflected on the writing process together with Anthony Heidweiller, Debora van Stenis-Patty, writing teacher Gijsje Kooter, drama teacher Maaïke Kempers and general educational coach Ingrid van Leeuwen. The pupils had just received their libretti rolled up in large yellow sheets of paper. The following Friday in the gym at the Grote Trekdreef school, they in turn were to hand them over to the student composers and singers. In contrast to *Pit*, this time the children had based their work on improvised scenes with directions such as "someone rings the doorbell, what happens?" In this way they had worked from performance to text.

A fascinating discussion arose during our evaluation on the supposedly greater artistic value of the abstract as opposed to the concrete. Ingrid van Leeuwen thought the children's text stuck too closely to reality. Gijsje Kooter would actually have preferred to have got even closer to the children's perception of the world: "Just going to Spain on holiday, scenes about what's most normal in their lives. I would have liked it if *Opera Flats* had become a block of flats like that."<sup>37</sup> Maaïke Kempers raised the necessity of acquiring a deeper knowledge of the participants' culture and of suppressing one's own sense of aesthetics as an artist: "Only one girl had heard of things I grew up with, like *The Princess and The Pea*." So you need to find out more about what fairy tales they do know, what stories they grow up with, and who tells the stories. It would be nice to start from this point, so you actually have to set aside your own ideas.

Anthony Heidweiller, who had not been involved in the writing process himself, thought the libretti were actually highly imaginative and not in the least concrete. However, he had just found out that day that, to his astonishment, the children thought they were going to sing themselves. This impression was confirmed by the others. But by this time the arrangements with the singers and composers from the music colleges had already been made. It was now important that these music school students should treat the primary school pupils' material as respectfully as possible. I offered to make a video on the way a composer works because there was no real plan to maintain contact between the primary school children and the music students during the composition and rehearsal process, which was largely planned to take place during the summer months.<sup>38</sup>

37 All quotes from this group discussion have been transcribed from video recordings made on 7 May 2007, excerpts from which can be seen at <http://www.yo-opera.nl/media/operaflat-2007/1467>

38 This video, "Kids & Composers", can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLpQpSSczIo> It was shown before the summer holiday to the classes involved.

Once again the relentless production schedule and the existing commitments to music colleges did not allow the directors to respond flexibly to developing insights and gradually steer the process in a new direction at a gentle pace. The mini-operas simply had to be performed for an audience during the Yo! Opera festival on Saturday 3 November. The communication between composers, singers and pupils also left much to be desired. The promising presentation of the libretti by pupils to the singers and composers in the gym at the Grote Trekdreef school on 11 May was followed by a period of silence that lasted too long, and which could not be compensated for by the brief video message by composer Lucas Wiegerink to pupil Marwan.<sup>39</sup> It was a full five months later, on Friday 2 November, that the pupils got to hear and see the results of their work at a very lively dress rehearsal in the doorways of classrooms at the Grote Trekdreef school. Only ten of the twenty-five pupils involved and a handful of parents were present at the following one-off performance on 3 November. Visitors from the surrounding streets and residents of Faustdreef were equally underrepresented. As in 2005, the majority of the audience members were typical festival visitors: relatively well educated and from ethnically Dutch backgrounds. Some composers and singers were very enthusiastic about the collaboration with primary school children and about performing at this unusual location. Others were less keen and a couple had actually dropped out. The ten pupils present from the Grote Trekdreef school on 3 November, said in interviews with me that they had enjoyed the drama and writing lessons and were proud of their operas.<sup>40</sup>

### Opera Flats 3 (2009)

In December 2008, more than a year later, Anthony Heidweiller designed a first sketch for the third edition of *Opera Flats*. In doing so he took into account a number of our points of criticism of *Opera Flats 2*. One of the explicit aims of *Opera Flats 3* was therefore to involve the Faustdreef residents more closely in the production. He also expressed the desire to raise the libretti to a higher level in terms of language and content by working this time with secondary rather than primary school pupils. This would require stronger commitment on the part of teachers as well as more careful communication between pupils and music students.

In the second week of January 2009, *Opera Flats 3* was launched with a first brainstorming session. This was attended by project manager Ellen van Beek, educational specialist Debora van Stenis-Patty, head of research and development Geert van Boxtel, Anthony Heidweiller and myself. In the weeks that followed, this team set out a plan of approach that emphasised the promotion of co-ownership among residents and pupils. The overarching theme of "food" was chosen to facilitate this process, as it was seen as a neutral topic with which different generations would be able to work. It was decided that in order to involve the residents more intensively the secondary school students would interview them about this theme

39 Debora van Stenis-Patty adds: "Several pupils exchanged letters with 'their' composers and singers, at the suggestion of our team. A number of children and composers then took up the idea. These letters weren't used for discussing compositions or libretti. The composer explained what he'd been doing recently, for instance" (personal email, 7 December 2012).

40 The absence of 60 per cent of the participating pupils on 3 November does not necessarily mean that they attached no value to the project. Saturday afternoons are busy for families with children.

in their homes. In these first weeks the possibility was discussed of having the residents cook during the performance on 7 November and putting their favourite recipes on the menu at the Yo! festival in the Stadsschouwburg theatre. The Rietveld College was then approached as creative partner. This is a comprehensive school on the boundary between the districts of Overvecht and Tuindorp with a highly culturally and socially diverse student population. On the advice of art teacher Emiel van Ekert, second-year VMBO (vocational secondary education) pupils were chosen to work on the libretti and the development of the operas. This group was more culturally and socially diverse than the more academic streams, was not troubled by first-year ups and downs or final examinations, and potentially had the most to gain from this alternative art activity. The design for *Opera Flats 3* thus became an experimental mix of community arts and creative partnership.

On 3 February, Ellen van Beek and Debora van Stenis-Patty managed to persuade no less than fourteen of the necessary twenty-five residents to make their doorways available during the festival.<sup>41</sup> One of them, Jantine van der Veen, turned out to be suitable to take a vanguard position in the block of flats. She was a visual artist herself and gave writing courses for women from ethnic minorities at a nearby neighbourhood centre. She also had huge practical experience of the area, having lived in the building for 40 years. Jantine van der Veen was to take on an important role in involving the other residents, designing the doorways and coordinating the cooking activities on 7 November. Ilonka Verdurmen, whom Anthony Heidweiller knew from a previous project in Amsterdam, was recruited from the School der Poëzie (School for Poetry) to supervise the interview and writing process. Thanks to a prize won by Yo! Opera, resources also became available to create a digital work environment. This made it possible to follow up on the previous attempt in this area during the opera *Pit*. The task was given to Mediamatic, an expert in the field of digital social networks and online communities, and web designer Killyourdarlings. They created a user-friendly interactive website, which was sometimes a busy hub of communication, but which ultimately did not bring about the intensive relationship between pupils and composers for which the project directors had hoped.

In May and June there was an explosion of activity at the Rietveld College and the Faustdreef. On 15 May the singers and composers from the participating music colleges came to the Utrecht secondary school for an explanation of the project and a brief training in how to use the digital work environment. In the afternoon they met their team members from the Rietveld College. After an informal exchange of personal information, they worked together on a musical video message for the Faustdreef residents. This was later posted on the website, and there was great enthusiasm on both sides.

<sup>41</sup> The rest followed quite quickly. This was helped by the fact that Yo! was well known due to the two previous editions of *Opera Flats*.



Opera singer singing *Cousin Murat* from Groningen. Photo: Anna van Kooij, 2007.



On 25 and 26 May, Ilonka Verdurmen ran interview and writing workshops at the school. In the weeks that followed, the pupils visited twenty-five residents at their homes to interview them about their favourite dishes and any other related stories. These meetings also went well. Like the sessions with the music students, they bridged cultural and generational differences. The interviews, at which a Yo! Opera team member was usually also present, yielded good stories. On 9 and 10 June the transcribed interviews were transformed into libretti under Verdurmen's editorial supervision. The results were sent to the composers and made available to the Faustdreef residents online.

The momentum tailed off in the summer holidays when there was no compulsion to follow the timetables of the school and colleges involved and there were no additional impulses from the project team. Foreign trips and holiday jobs had taken priority for the students and pupils. The original intention had been to keep the website active during July and August so the composers, singers and pupils could continue to discuss the operas. In practice most of the composers began composing independently, and in many cases there was not even communication between them and the singers, let alone with the pupils of the Rietveld College.

The radio silence during the summer months caused a gulf to develop between the music students and the school pupils. By September it seemed unbridgeable, and was still growing because the balance of professional attention in this phase threatened to tip towards the composers. On 11 September students and pupils came back together in a first session after the holidays to discuss the compositions. But the structure of these discussions did not help to reanimate the waning enthusiasm. Several pupils failed to put in an appearance because it wasn't a compulsory school activity. The decision had been made to invite well-known composers to lead the discussions, and in general they showed more interest in the music students than in the school pupils. They also had little experience in communicating with secondary school pupils studying at vocational level. They therefore focused somewhat technically on the notes and structure of the compositions. As a consequence the school pupils contributed relatively little to these discussions, of which there were eleven that day. It didn't help matters that the compositions were posted on the website as visual musical scores rather than as audio files. This created an additional obstacle for the majority of students, who could not read music.

### From a report by psychologist Ivana Cerovečki:

*The members of Team 13 are C. (singing student), H. (composition student) and K. (Rietveld College pupil). They are discussing the first rough version of their mini-opera under the supervision of professional composer B, sitting at a table in the Rietveld College canteen.*

B. (to K.): Did you stick to what the resident said or did you add anything yourself?  
K.: I stuck to what she said. I had to interview her about food, what she did and didn't like, and whether anything had happened recently ... that's where the exploding oven came from. But I'd forgotten to bring my paper with questions from school.  
B.: (to C.): Would you like to sing it?  
C. *sings the mini-opera. During the song C. tries to make a "plop" with her finger in her mouth but she doesn't succeed. K. demonstrates how, showing that he can do it. K. watches and listens attentively as C. sings the opera. He laughs at the final sentence, "Mrs Verheul is so generous".*  
K.: Yes, because she was going to bake a cake for us when we'd finished everything.  
C. and H. *then discuss the composition. K. listens but says nothing.*  
B. (to K.): What do you think?  
K.: It sounded good, I don't know how it normally goes...  
B.: What had you been expecting? Is it like what you had thought it would be?  
K.: I knew it would be an opera, but I didn't know it would sound like that... I didn't know it would be real opera.  
B., H. and C. *discuss the composition in more depth. B. asks about a number of the composers decisions. They neither address nor look at K during this discussion. At first he listens, but his attention wanes and he soon starts looking around the room and out of the window.*

While K. was still a relatively equal partner, pupil J. in team 15 was hardly involved in the discussion at all. This was also the case in teams 16 and 17. Anthony Heidweiller, who visited various groups and observed pupil L.'s flagging enthusiasm, urged her to say something. When L. heard the singer bleating, she said: "It should be more like trembling. It's cold; it's got nothing to do with goats." M. sang the mini-opera again, this time with a tremor in her voice. S. responded enthusiastically: "Wow! I can hear this all the way in the back of my head! It really sounds great, I think that's really brilliant!" (CAL-Utrecht internal report).

In contrast to *Opera Flats 2* and *Pit*, and partly thanks to the observations we swiftly passed back to the project team, this time the process was redirected while it was in progress. It was decided that for the second round of meetings between singers, composers and pupils, the discussions should be led by Anthony Heidweiller, Debora van Stenis-Patty, Geert van Boxtel and Ellen van Beek. They were specifically directed to stimulate input from the school pupils by focusing on an analysis of their libretti instead of on the technical aspects of the compositions. We observed that this new approach did indeed work better.



The plan was that on 2, 9, 16 and 23 October, singers, composers and pupils led by a theatre director would work on staging the operas. To prevent these sessions from again getting bogged down in technical discussions between music students and professionals, the project leader asked the directors to find out in advance in individual conversations with the pupils how they imagined their mini-opera should look. Two teams we observed on 16 October functioned fairly similarly. Pupil Q. was somewhat passive at first, but when he heard that he too was invited to perform in the mini-opera, he suddenly started brimming with enthusiasm. O. also contributed ideas and dared to express criticism. Cerovečki observed that, “the other team members gave him plenty of opportunity to join in the creative process; they listened attentively and took his ideas seriously” (CAL-Utrecht internal report).

*“A surprisingly large number of the local residents had cooked, so smell and taste really did feed into the artistic experience.”*

It is a pity that for the rehearsal in October only nine of the twenty-five pupils turned up. It was also an indication that the gulf between the school and the project had become too wide. However, those pupils still actively involved at this point in the process clearly felt more at ease than they had done during the sessions in September. But only five pupils turned up at the dress rehearsal in classroom doorways on the afternoon of Friday 30 October. The enthusiasm among the composers and singers on the other hand was stronger than ever. They were excitedly looking forward to the day of the performance.

The twenty-five mini-operas in *Opera Flats 3* premiered on 7 November 2009. Six pupils from the Rietveld College came to watch. Two of them had managed to secure an active role in the operas they had written. It was clear that they were enjoying themselves, and so too were the music students. A surprisingly large number of the local residents (ten of the twenty-five) had cooked, so smell and taste really did feed into the artistic experience. Yo! even succeeded in having the recipes from Faustdreef included on the festival menu at the Stadsschouwburg municipal theatre, though this venue was a bridge too far for the residents. *Opera Flats 3* on 7 November 2009 also attracted a much larger audience than in 2007, although the majority of its members still fitted the typical profile of the regular festivalgoer. The interest on the part of residents from surrounding streets remained low.

Despite Yo!’s aim of promoting co-ownership among the pupils with *Opera Flats 3*, the number of actively participating pupils fell from twenty-five to nine between May and November over the course of the creative process for this third edition. Seeking to clarify the reasons for the pupils’ decreasing level of participation and interest, CAL-Utrecht researcher Ivana Cerovečki drew up a small-scale survey which she had the pupils and music students complete on 30 October and 7 November. The questions were primarily aimed at finding out about the sense

of co-ownership and the cooperation among the teams. Her conclusion was that the sense of co-ownership in *Opera Flats 3* among the Rietveld College pupils was minimal, certainly in view of the pupils that dropped out. However, her research shows that the music students had an entirely different experience. But their enthusiasm appeared to stem from working in an unconventional location rather than from cooperating with the school pupils.

### Survey

Of the nine secondary school respondents, five (55.6%) said they very much enjoyed taking part in *Opera Flats 3* and four of them (44.4%) would very much like to work on a similar project again. The rest were considerably less enthusiastic. Four of the nine pupils (44.4%) said they had felt equal to the music students during the creative process. Five (55.6%) of the pupils felt less than equal. Six (66.6%) of the nine pupils said they had not felt very useful during the process of making the mini-opera. Three (33.3%) of the pupils said they had felt useful.

Thirty-two music students returned a completed questionnaire. None of them said they had not enjoyed participating in the project. Eleven students (34.4%) were highly enthusiastic and twelve (37.5%) said they would definitely like to take part in a project like *Opera Flats* again. However, most of the students (65.6%) said they hardly found it inspiring at all to make a mini-opera with school pupils. Only five students were enthusiastic about it and two said it was very inspiring.

Our survey shows that the decreasing level of participation among the pupils was chiefly due to the excessive length of the break in the creative process during the summer months. The digital work environment offered too little consolation. In addition, the first meetings after the summer were too technical in nature, so the distance between the school pupils and music students rapidly grew. The later redirection had little effect. Our observations during the rehearsals (and the survey at the end) confirm the impression that during the creative process the majority of the Rietveld College pupils were not viewed as equal partners by their team members (the students) and the professional composers and directors. This attitude on the part of the music students could be an additional reason for the decreasing level of participation among the students. In-depth interviews with pupil C. and pupil M. confirm that impression, while Q. was one of the few who were pleased with the open attitude of his composer and singer.

C. mainly enjoyed the writing. Knowing nothing about music, he did not mind that he had no influence on the composition. He was proud of how the opera turned out and said he would like to participate again. What he liked most was that he was allowed to perform in the piece himself. M. had been to one rehearsal in October. She had the feeling that she had only been there for form’s sake, so she did not go again. She enjoyed interviewing the Faustdreef residents the most, but on reflection she thought the whole project was actually pretty dull,

partly because so many other pupils dropped out. Of the three pupils interviewed on 30 October, Q. was by far the most positive. He felt he had been taken seriously by his team members and appreciated being allowed to perform in the piece. It turned out that he had previously been at the Rietendakschool and had taken part in *Water* in 2005. “This was much nicer”, he said, “because I could join in the decision-making. Before we were just given an assignment” (Cerovečki interviews, Utrecht, 30 October 2009).

*“Over a little less than a decade Yo! had created brief but significant proposals on how to mix community arts and opera.”*

During the later evaluation, Rietveld College teacher Emiel van Ekert confirmed that his pupils had dropped out because they lacked a sense of ownership. He said they should have been more actively involved in designing the website, in the choice of a more exciting theme than “food” and in the creative process. Anthony Heidweiller said he realised that Yo! as an organisation had wanted to stay too much in control: “This just encourages passivity. You should actually focus entirely on the process and make the product of secondary importance.” This would make it more exciting for the young people, van Ekert said: “The more you let go, the more surprising it is, but I understand that a lack of structure is also difficult for adolescents. That’s a dilemma.” But he was convinced that especially before the summer *Opera Flats* had given some pupils a major boost: “They now have a very different attitude towards opera, and meeting and interacting with professionals and arts students, people who are good at things, was very important for them” (minutes of *Opera Flats 3* evaluation, Utrecht, 1 December 2009).

Debora van Stenis-Patty believes that Yo! should have made clearer choices. As it was, there were too many competing aims at the same time: “Where do you put the emphasis? On young people as the makers, or on young people as the audience?” (ibid.). She was in any case sure that the primary focus was not on the residents of the flats or the school pupils, but principally on the music colleges and the inspiration of young composers and singers.

Over the course of 2010, the Yo! Opera organisation must have realised that working in communities demands fundamentally different skills from missionary work at music colleges and creative partnerships with educational institutions. And that even a combination of the two latter aims does not work well. In 2011, Yo! did make a clear choice in favour of greater artistic input by the young people participating. This time the participants were pupils at the Globe College, a community school for VMBO pupils in the Kanaleneiland area of Utrecht. Apart from writing libretti (much longer ones this time) they were genuinely given the opportunity to work on the music and appearance of the piece. Yo! gave the pupils unequivocal priority and the arts students took on a supporting role rather than their previous creative one. It is hard to determine the extent to

which CAL-Utrecht’s critical feedback played a role in this choice.<sup>42</sup> The fact is that between 2005 and 2010 we came to know Yo! Opera through its educational community projects as an open organisation that was eager to learn and which adapted its attitude and methods from year to year with growing insight. It is therefore regrettable that after its sixth festival Yo! disbanded, because this also meant the end of innovative community opera in Utrecht. Over a little less than a decade Yo! had created brief but significant proposals on how to mix community arts and opera. November on the Faustdreef is now as dreary as it was before 2005, but if you listen carefully, you can still hear a distant echo from 7 April 2007: Anthony Heidweiller’s sonorous voice singing “Figaro, Figaro, Figaro!...”

<sup>42</sup> Deborah van Stenis-Patty writes: “Another educational project during the last festival was one that I could set up according to my own judgement. In doing so I took into account the evaluation points of the *Opera Flats* of 2009” (email to the author, 7 December 2012).

***6. Wrestling  
with roots in  
East Harlem:  
5eKwartier  
and the Story  
Kitchen***



**It was around 4.30 on the sunny afternoon of Saturday 26 May 2012 that I drew up at the mosque on Prins Bernhardlaan in East Haarlem. About 500 metres away I could see the colourful wooden construction at the waterside rising six or so metres into the air next to an orange circus tent. There were children on the banks of the lake painting plexiglas plates on easels while small groups of picnickers sat on the grass nearby. And in the tent pitched next to the circus caravan serving as a reception desk, local residents were serving Dutch soup, North African dishes and Ethiopian coffee to the guests, a mix of locals and visitors.**

The band led by double bassist Ted van Leeuwen struck up and drew the audience's attention to the stage. His partner Titia Bouwmeester, the artistic director of this enterprise, spoke through the microphone to split the assembled group into four sections. They would each be following a guide who could be identified by the brightly coloured bird boxes they held aloft on branches. I accompanied the group walking to a lawn in front of a block of flats, where we saw actress Brigitte Defaix taking on the role of a single mother carving a path for herself through the ups and downs of life, searching for simple moments of happiness. As she told her story, she hung washing around us on lines running from tree to tree. I interpreted this as a positive symbol of the things that *were* going well in her life, as a compelling ritual representing a temporary existential grip on the uneven path of everyday existence. Ted van Leeuwen accentuated shifting emotions with improvised percussion on an upturned rubber bucket and, more melodically, on a xylophone. He and Brigitte Defaix had based their script on conversations they'd had in the preceding months with local residents of Parkwijk. The restrained tone of this open-air performance poetry belied the many layers of meaning it conveyed.

### **The complex position of the community artist**

Cohen-Cruz, Kwon, Kester, Thompson and Trienekens all point out how tricky it can be to operate as an artist in the zone of tension between the interests of local residents and commissioning organisations (welfare, housing associations and local authority cultural and social development departments) while also ensuring they have the opportunity to carry out their own artistic work. Internal tensions on an individual level can also often exert an influence. These may include artistic ambition, a desire for recognition from the mainstream art world, private life issues, and a sense of moral responsibility that goes hand in hand with this kind of unpredictable relationship. Each time again, that fragile balance must be sought between these issues and vested interests, and preserved as long as possible. That's also the art of making community arts. The way in which this balance is achieved will vary from situation to situation for various reasons: because the context changes with the location, because specific dynamics are associated with the selected art form, or because the artist's character draws him or her in a particular direction.

Miwon Kwon points out the enormous variety of activities in the international field that we in the Netherlands still describe as "community arts" for convenience's sake. Kwon believes that cooperation and negotiation between artist, community and commissioning agency tend to be far more complex than the rhetoric about these enterprises lead to believe (2004, 116–117). Thus, some project proposals promise "organic and dialogic relationships between the artist and the community", but in fact more often than not plans have been concocted well beforehand without any consultation between the artistic or institutional initiators and the participants they have in mind (ibid., 123). For Kwon this "reinforces the view that 'community' collaborations are often artist-driven and curatorially directed. Despite the public foregrounding and rhetorical elevation of the community in the discourse, in such cases the specific community group seems to perform a relatively incidental role" (ibid., 124).

***"The growing interest in community arts among established arts institutions and funding organisations has everything to do with their need to broaden the social and ethnic diversity of their audience."***

Kwon is renowned for her trenchant ethical questioning and her refusal to be swayed too easily by success stories. Thus, she warns against the danger of "new forms of urban primitivism over socially neglected minority groups. The 'other' of the dominant culture thus becomes objectified once again to satisfy the contemporary lust for authentic histories and identities" (ibid., 138–139). This can in turn lead to community artists unintentionally helping to shore up the marginal status of people living in poorer areas, instead of helping to free them from it. Referring to Kester, Kwon also notes that community artists tend to underestimate the intrinsic power of communities, which are seldom the "passive, almost silent entities upon which artists ostensibly perform their transformative magic" (ibid., 144). The growing interest in community arts among established arts institutions and funding organisations has everything to do with their need (or the political task imposed on them) to broaden the social and ethnic diversity of their audience. Governments often see this arts practice as "soft social engineering", a relatively cheap alternative to social work that can be used to mask explosive situations and the true causes of tensions or "legitimate dissatisfaction that many community groups feel in regard to the uneven distribution of existing cultural and economic resources" (ibid., 153).

Artists must feel their way between these two extremes if they are to give rise to relevant art in highly dynamic locations with constantly changing partners. Kwon is most enamoured of artists who come from the cities in which they are carrying out projects and leave behind something that lasts beyond the end

of the grant period.<sup>43</sup> The reason for her preference is that these local artists have first-hand knowledge of the area and the people living in it, giving them the advantage that they are able to approach “their projects with a realistic (rather than a hypothetical) sense of possibilities” (ibid., 132). This allows them more easily to enter into and maintain personal relationships with participants, accelerating the establishment of trust and flexible, dialogic communication. Kwon believes that artists with this “home field advantage” are far better placed to tackle breakdowns in communication and everyday issues more quickly than artists working remotely and responding far too slowly. Their proximity and local knowledge maximises their effectiveness in integrating the art project in the lives of participants. Kwon adds, however, that if they really want to have a sustained effect, artists need to leave means of production behind as well as the skills to use them effectively. But she also points out that “home field advantage” is not the only way to go: “in many instances, it may be the outsider’s perspective that provides the more cogent and incisive contribution or intervention into whatever community issues are at hand” (ibid., 135). All of the considerations described by Kwon are relevant to the following account devoted to Haarlem-based artists’ collective 5eKwartier (5th Quarter).

### 5eKwartier and Dogtroep

Titia Bouwmeester and Ted van Leeuwen founded 5eKwartier in 2004. They shared a history as members of Dogtroep, she as a theatre maker and artistic director, and he as a musician. The company’s name refers to both the Dutch phrase *kwartiermaken* (laying the groundwork, preparing the quarters) and the added value of a *vijfde kwartier* (fifth quarter) in an hour. Titia Bouwmeester explains:

We literally build a physical place in the community. The meeting place comes to life through making music there, performing plays in which we reflect on the local narrative, and inviting people to help shape the place. These projects often last two or three years, and we work on them with a large number of participants (interview with the author, Haarlem, 5 September 2012).

The greatest difference between Dogtroep and 5eKwartier is that the latter are far less nomadic and far more interested in documentary work closely engaged with the people living in the selected area. Titia Bouwmeester says that 5eKwartier adds value by using artistic tools to make future scenarios for a given area visible and by, “giving grief, pride and joy a tangible or visual form as part of broadly supported, exciting and energising projects, that lots and lots of people are invited to contribute to” (ibid.).

<sup>43</sup> Kwon reserves particular praise for Street-Level Video in Chicago. They ensured that filming equipment remained permanently available to participants, rather than lending it out for the duration of the project: “The project exists in 2002 as Street-Level Youth Media, incorporated since 1995 as a nonprofit arts organization in its own right, with some of the original participants from 1993 serving as codirectors” (2004, 135).

Bouwmeester believes that the unique strengths of community arts are displayed at their best in carefully organised activities during sluggish urban renewal projects being resisted by local people:

Urban regeneration projects move really slowly. They sometimes take decades. Sometimes it looks like houses are going to be demolished right away, and then it takes three years before anything actually happens. And then three years down the line there are still no new homes. People start feeling they don’t have any influence on what’s going on around them. Our projects, on the other hand, produce tangible results, such as a play or a concept that lots of people help making. These shorter arcs during a much longer urban development process allow people to really take back ownership of their environment. Their contribution to the community really matters in our artistic activities (ibid.).

Bouwmeester developed these insights – which she expressed so powerfully in interviews for this book in September 2012 – over a period of six years. The film accompanying this chapter follows that development from 2007 onwards. But 5eKwartier was already learning to take a more indirect approach to its documentary work in *CineMeal* (*Cinemaaltijd*, 2006), an artistically styled supper compiled from the favourite dishes of residents at the Aveant care home in Lombok, Utrecht.<sup>44</sup> Each course was preceded by a film of a resident cooking a favourite recipe, accompanied by live music:

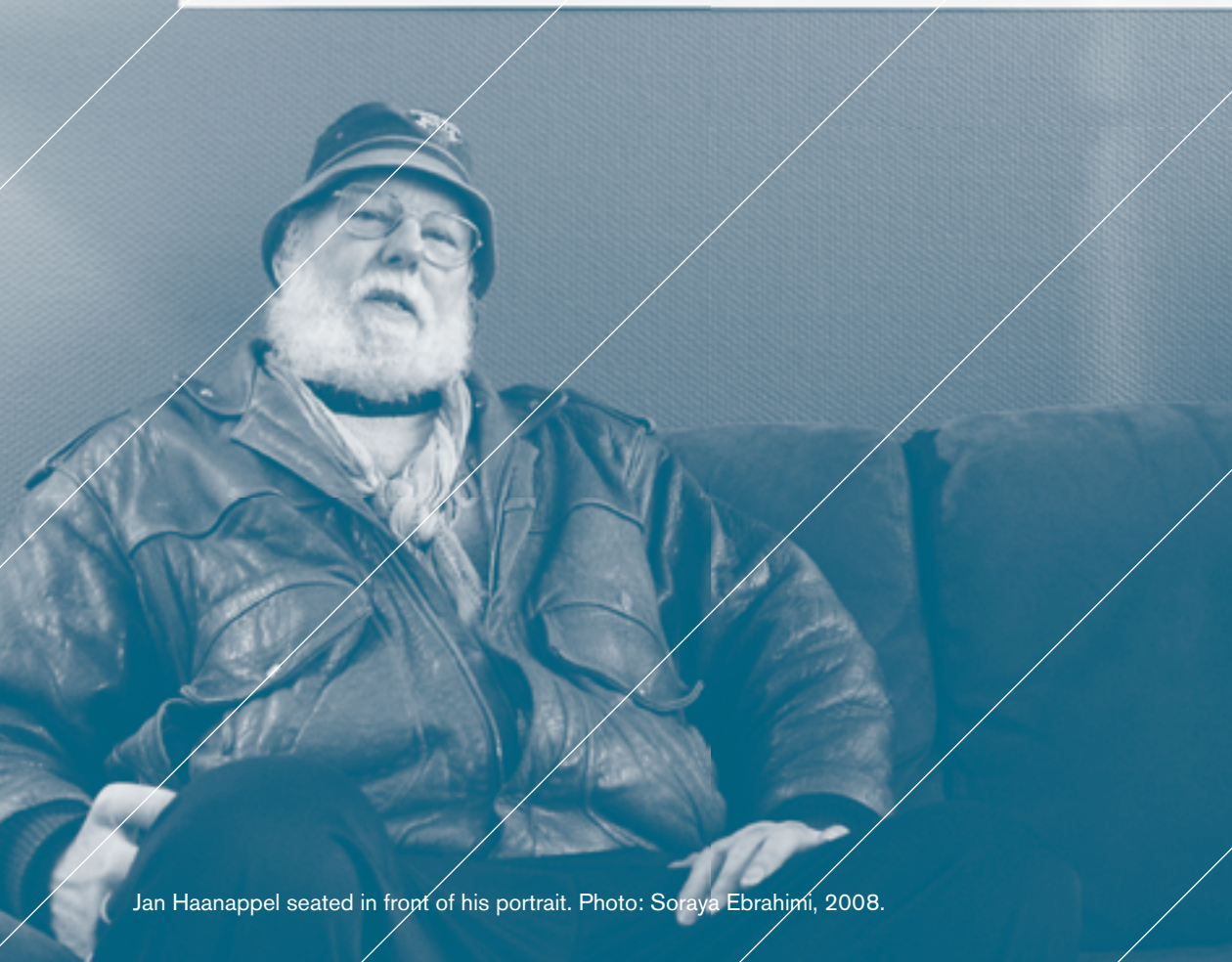
In those short films we captured the craft and the love these people put into making their favourite recipes. But we discovered how confronting it can be if you make a documentary and then screen it in the local area. If people literally see themselves onscreen, there’s the danger that it becomes overly anecdotal because you’re only portraying one person. It’s important to me that we transform the documentation into stories that have a universal relevance that a broad audience can identify with (interview with the author, Haarlem, 28 October 2008).

This was the main reason behind 5eKwartier starting to work with professional theatre makers who base scenes on discussions with multiple interviewees and become their representatives when telling a story to “the other”.

A year after *CineMeal* in autumn 2007, Titia Bouwmeester and Ted van Leeuwen began working in the community in the Voordijkshoorn district of Delft, which they discovered was a very different experience from working in a hospital, prison or care home for the elderly, where participants have far more in common with one another. Bouwmeester and Van Leeuwen wanted to connect white and non-white people living in Van Kinschotstraat and Camerlingstraat by getting them to make short films together. Their plan was selected from 100 applicants by a project group consisting of civil servants and staff at housing corporations and welfare organisations – but, strangely enough, no local residents.

<sup>44</sup> *CineMeal* was co-produced by Vrede van Utrecht. This was CAL-Utrecht’s introduction to 5eKwartier.





Jan Haanappel seated in front of his portrait. Photo: Soraya Ebrahimi, 2008.

It was mostly young families with children who got involved in the project. They were given a camera and some training in operating it. They were asked to photograph their everyday surroundings, working according to various different themes, and to also interview people. Together, the 96 short films they made formed a multifaceted reflection of people in the area that local people could view in a kind of film jukebox. 5eKwartier came up with an additional use for the total archive of 30,000 photographs: they designed two large hollow bowls (*fluisterheuvels*, or “whispering hills”) that would be placed in the public garden between the two streets. These parabolas reflect sound to each other over a distance of up to 30 metres. 5eKwartier arranged that inside each of these bowls they would place a single image formed using a collage of the entire archive of photos. Seen from a distance, one of these becomes the smile on the face of Mohammed, a young boy living on Van Kinschotstraat; while the other becomes the mouth of Jan Haanappel, a well-known older man living on Camerlingstraat.

The *InsideWorldOutside* (*BinnenwereldBuiten*) project in Delft only lasted three months. The most important lesson 5eKwartier learned from this experience was that as an artistic organisation, it was best to operate independently of partner organisations. Ever since, 5eKwartier have made it a condition of their projects that they only work together with local organisations such as schools, welfare agencies and existing grassroots initiatives in the area. They also decided it was necessary to spend a lot more time than three months on each project. This is the background to *Story Kitchen* (*De Verhalenkeuken*) in Slachthuisbuurt (Abattoir District),<sup>45</sup> a project that was given a new lease of life in December 2012 just a few streets away in Parkwijk, under the name *East Canteen* (*KantineOost*). The three months in Delft thus grew to five years (and counting) in Haarlem.

Titia Bouwmeester confirms that Kwon’s “home field advantage” was the decisive factor for 5eKwartier to start in the eastern districts of Haarlem:

Ted and I are the heart of 5eKwartier and it occupies us day and night. In Haarlem, closer to home, you can use your time much more effectively than if you’re stuck in a traffic jam on the way to Delft. This kind of project also works well if you’re personally present at the location a lot of the time – preferably five days a week – so you’re visible and people can approach you. And you can also better rethink how you want things yourself (interview, 2008).

Just living in a city doesn’t mean that you know every district equally well or that you’re automatically an insider wherever you go. Although she’s from Haarlem, this well-educated middle-class artist was just as much an outsider in this working-class neighbourhood as anyone else from her social milieu would be. That has both disadvantages (difficulties winning trust) and advantages (neutrality on tensions in the area). And East Haarlem itself turned out to comprise a large number of smaller areas. Bouwmeester ultimately chose to work in the Slachthuisbuurt district of Haarlem for a number of reasons:

<sup>45</sup> This district takes its name from the abattoir that used to be located in the area. Former abattoir workers were among the local people invited to participate in the projects explored in this chapter.



It's an old working-class area where large numbers of workers no longer feel at home because things have changed. Major employers have left the area and lots of the older workers have retired. Plus there's been a huge influx of migrants who also feel rootless. Lots of houses were planned for demolition, and there were signs of decay everywhere you looked. But there was also one huge new opportunity: an old school in the neighbourhood was going to be converted into a multifunctional community centre. We were given a place there so we could help shape it together with the school and a welfare organisation. There were some inspirational people involved, including the school headmaster Ruud Barnhoorn and Geja Muffels, a community worker. Plus the local council and the housing corporations were supporting it. So we just got started and put together all kinds of activities as we went along, responding to people's requests and implementing the plans of the three organisations involved (interview 2012).

From December 2007 to March 2010, 5eKwartier developed an effective community arts method by literally setting up their quarters in this new building, making contact with social partners, and creating added value in the form of short-term arts projects as part of a long-term whole.

#### **Story Kitchen 0.0: the pilot in Petrus School**

In the second half of 2007, Haarlem city council launched the *Looking at East Haarlem (Kijken naar Haarlem Oost)* arts project, which saw Marjolijn Boterenbrood leading artists, urban developers and designers in the search for the hidden qualities in this relatively poor section of the city. The aim was to identify potential locations for developing cultural initiatives for urban regeneration. 5eKwartier also received an invitation, so off Titia Bouwmeester cycled on her search:

It's pretty quickly obvious where the energy is, where activities involving local people develop. Take Doenja mother's centre, for example, where I met Geja Muffels. That place is really buzzing, and lots of women were actively involved: there was a cooking group, there were Dutch lessons, cycling lessons, craft activities involving textile. That place was really vibrant. And I could just feel how passionate Geja was about her work and that she had this ability to bring out people's talents. That kind of passionate, personal approach is rare in the welfare sector (interview. 2008).

Geja Muffels still clearly remembers that first meeting:

She phoned me on 4 December (the day before the Dutch Sinterklaas celebration). And I said, "We're celebrating Sinterklaas tomorrow," and she came along on 5 December. We'd been running Doenja for a year and we'd already got 30 volunteers. She just sat with the group and joined in. Afterwards she explained that she also wanted to do something to do with the kitchen and cooking with the women. And she wanted to have a permanent venue for it. We were housed in building set for demolition and we were looking for a new place, so it fitted well with our situation. And then in January a group of us women from Doenja went down in a minibus to Delft to have a look at *InsideWorldOutside*. That made the whole idea of a lot clearer to me (interview with the author, Haarlem, 28 October 2008).

That autumn Titia Bouwmeester met Ruud Barnhoorn, the headmaster at Franciscus Xaverius primary school. She saw how he'd got his pupils working with elderly people at the nearby Reinaldahuis nursing home. Barnhoorn and Geja Muffels were also on the steering committee that was helping to shape the new multifunctional community centre that was going to be set up in the area. They invited Bouwmeester to join them in their discussions about how arts could be integrated into the overall activities of the new multifunctional community centre.

The test phase of the arts project, which was now called *Story Kitchen*, ran from 19 February to 22 April 2008. Further developing an idea from *InsideWorldOutside*, 5eKwartier got together with pupils from Franciscus Xaverius primary school and mothers from Doenja to make short films about their mothers. By mid-March they were ready to place their food-laden table, surrounded by "story cabinets" of films and photos, among the other items on display at the *Looking at East Haarlem* exhibition, which was held in the vacant Petrus School building on the Prins Bernhardlaan. From 20 March to 20 April local people and other interested parties came along to watch films, to listen to music and poetry (including an asylum seeker's first poem in Dutch), to taste food, and to talk with one another in discussions led by storytelling artist Anne van Delft. I joined the kitchen table discussion on Thursday 3 April and experienced for myself the emotional impact of the films, the confidence with which the Doenja volunteers took on their role as hostesses (and poets in the making), and how the combination of these ingredients sparked conversation and united worlds.

*"If you want to understand the disaffection, you need to realise that this used to be a socialist area and the Catholics were on the other side."*

The pilot project in Petrus primary school gave enough confidence to Barnhoorn, Muffels, Préwonen housing corporation and the social services body Dock to ask 5eKwartier to continue working with them. On the face of it, in the summer of 2008 it looked like *Story Kitchen* was turning into an ideal scenario. Muffels and Barnhoorn were powerful partners for 5eKwartier because both of them had extensive networks and good contacts among the higher echelons and in the neighbourhood. The primary school and mother's centre gave the artists access to a potentially large number of engaged participants. And being involved in consultations about the new multifunctional community centre before it was even set up meant they would have the ideal base of operations in the neighbourhood. This facility was going to bring together various sectors, including education, childcare, daycare for elderly people with dementia, a mothers' centre, and 5eKwartier itself.

There were catches to this apparently ideal collaboration, however. One of them was to do with the fact that three housing corporations were involved in purchasing and converting the community centre – they were going to be providing a quarter

of the operating budget. Other important players included Dock and the school board, Barnhoorn's nominal boss. Neither of these two organisations had much cash to spare and in both cases there was a gulf between upper management and the work floor at neighbourhood level. One consequence was that the appointment of Muffels and her colleague Rozien Saleh, both of whom were employed by Dock, remained uncertain right up to the end of the *Story Kitchen* project. It was also difficult for 5eKwartier to communicate with upper management levels. And there was a sense of negative socio-cultural tension around the building, something that can only be understood by looking at its history as a state school which in 2005 had to close due to a lack of pupils, while Barnhoorn had come from the Catholic Xaverius School. Barnhoorn explained that, "If you want to understand the disaffection, you need to realise that this used to be a socialist area and the Catholics were on the other side. Even the sports clubs used to be split that way. But they too have had to merge since then" (interview with the author, Haarlem, 28 October 2008).

Ilse van Dijk took over as business director of 5eKwartier in 2008, and she saw keeping all the different parties together as the greatest challenge. She was particularly concerned about the fragility of the welfare side, explaining that Dock had only recently taken over tasks from another welfare organisation in Haarlem:

What Dock's now saying to the council is this: "These are our fundamental activities, which are nationally accepted as a basic package in the welfare sector. We want to get such and such an amount from you for carrying them out. Everything else, including Geja's *buurtactief* (active neighbourhood) programme and the mother's centres are extras that cost so-and-so much." The council's squabbling about both of them because it's poor (interview with the author, Haarlem, 28 October 2008).

While Van Dijk and Bouwmeester put all their efforts into winning over support at government level in the run-up to the summer of 2008, the dilapidated former school building got an extreme makeover from May to August. 5eKwartier would be getting its own studio, but the most important room was to be a large meeting place with a kitchen and an open buffet area. This was set to become the school's "village square". There were tables there where mothers could stay for a cup of coffee after dropping off their children. The *Story Cabinets* (*Verhalenkasten*) were also given a home here. "The *Story Cabinet* is a fundamental element that will remain", stressed Van Dijk: "They'll regularly be filled up with new material with new themes. Next autumn it'll be 'mothers', then we'll have 'home', which will include personal memories but will be more about the history of the neighbourhood, and the third stage will be called 'song', so the main focus will be on music then" (ibid.).

### Story Kitchen 1.0: the opening of De Hamelink

Straight after the summer holidays, lessons got underway at the new primary school that was based in community centre De Hamelink, as did the informal activities run by 5eKwartier. Artists from 5eKwartier taught art at the school, immediately giving art and culture a permanent place on the timetable. These visual arts lessons followed the same thematic path as *Story Kitchen*, in order to get pupils and parents alike actively involved in the project.

The first *Story Kitchen* subproject focused on the communal opening of the building, which was planned for Saturday 11 October. Artists and local residents worked together in the studio making multicoloured flags to decorate the school's playground. The mothers from Doenja took on the catering for the party, and Ted van Leeuwen set about rehearsing a song he had written about Hamelink with a choir of local people, having brought together some friends from his Dogtroep days to form a band to accompany them. In the week before the opening, all the pupils at the school learned to play a rhythm that they'd be playing at the opening concert, using improvised instruments such as tuned scaffolding tubes and rubber buckets.

A highly effective word-of-mouth campaign was started with the help of local media (including the local digital paper *Wijkkrant Haarlem Oost*) and on a beautifully sunny day hundreds of people came to the official opening of De Hamelink. Ted's band played world music on the stage to the left of the main entrance, and the Hamelink song was sung with great gusto while the pupils jammed along and more than 600 flags made by local people fluttered above the schoolyard. The women from Doenja served home-made snacks, and visitors joined guided tours of the building that took in the opening exhibition of work the pupils had created. This happy, well-organised and successful party really put the new community centre on the map. Within no time, 5eKwartier had managed to mobilise large numbers of local people for this opening ritual. Two years later Gerard, an elderly local resident who later volunteered for *Story Kitchen*, still remembered it well: "There were all sorts of things. It was wonderful. All those flags" (interview with the author, 17 June 2010), and his wife Ellie could still sing the melody of the Hamelink song with no problem at all.

The opening of De Hamelink was the second test passed with flying colours in just six months, following on from the successful pilot. This undoubtedly increased 5eKwartier's goodwill credit with its partner organisations, believes Titia Bouwmeester:

They invest money into plans that exists on paper, but until the opening no one at the housing corporations had a clear idea of what to expect. When they saw it they realised, "Oh, that's how it works!" It's important to spark their imagination, so they realise that culture has a contribution to make to receptivity, passion, interaction, so it really adds something to their social agenda (interview, October 2008).

### Story Kitchen 2.0: Neighbourhood Meal

The end of October saw the start of a new arc of activity that would culminate in December in the *Neighbourhood Meal* (*Buurtmaaltijd*), an event that clearly recalled *CineMeal* with respect to its form and intention. It once again involved filming people at home preparing foreign dishes and traditional Dutch ones and editing the footage into short, poetic documentaries. An artist from 5eKwartier worked together with pupils from the community centre's primary school De Talenten (The Talents), older visitors, and women at the mother's centre, to make tablecloths for the communal area in De Hamelink. They combined drawings and personal poems with photos from their family albums printed onto fabric. Titia Bouwmeester was at De Hamelink as often as possible during this period, getting people involved in the activities:

I'm constantly bringing in new people, explaining what we're up to and finding a role for them. The process of putting it all together is a happy jumble of filming, cooking, tasting, sewing and storytelling. People get enthused by each other's energy and inspiration. The process is at least as important as the result. But I never lose sight of artistic quality. I'm working towards an experience in which all the elements complement each other. For me, it's all about the multiple layers in the presentation: the poetry of the documentary combined with the live music, the visual qualities of the tablecloths, the craft and dedication of the cooks. It's a communal artwork that's all about the passion that goes into making it. It's a passion that inspires and connects (ibid.).

Siham, a young Moroccan-Dutch volunteer at Doenja, had stayed involved ever since the Petrus School pilot, and she'd also joined Geja Muffels and her friend Kadisha on the trip to Delft back in January 2008. That trip had convinced her of what this kind of work could achieve. She cooked a pastilla dish for the *Neighbourhood Meal* film, and she was full of praise for Titia Bouwmeester: "When you meet Titia you know the work she's doing is really important. You see it in how she just talks with normal people. She's with you as a person, as a volunteer. She can give you advice, ideas, anything" (interview with the author, Haarlem, 17 June 2010).

*"Conversations struck up naturally between friends and total strangers, and they were only silenced by the start of the second film."*

Eight *Neighbourhood Meals* were served to a total of 600 diners at afternoon and evening sittings over the four days from 10 to 14 December. I was there on the Friday afternoon, 12 December, when local residents and other visitors were sitting together at tables in the communal area in De Hamelink. All of the tables were covered with beautiful cloths printed with photos from family albums. Some photos were framed with lace, which in one case had come from a bridal gown belonging to someone living nearby. Arranged around the tables, stood the *Story Cabinets* with their new material focusing on the theme of "mother". Ted van Leeuwen played bass, sax and xylophone, while Ben Lammerts van Bueren on electric guitar created laid-back, jazzy vibes. On the big screen, we could see how Siham prepared her pastilla dish. The film showed only close-ups of the ingredients and the cook's hands, accompanied by Siham's voice as she explained what she was doing in her own words. It had proved to be an effective way of getting people to participate who did not want their face to appear on film. As the film drew to a close, there was a wonderful aromatic crossfade as very real and very delicious smells wafted from the kitchen into the dining hall. Volunteers from Doenja in the local area then served the first course. Conversations struck up naturally between friends and total strangers, and they were only silenced by the start of the second film, which showed the preparation of a Kurdish dish, which was once again accompanied by live music. This three-act culinary performance featuring film, music, stories, aromas and flavours was brought to a close at about 1.30pm

with Elly's *Jan in de Zak*, a traditional Dutch baked dessert. The *Neighbourhood Meal* was tastefully and tastily produced with major contributions from local people, and provided an artistically decorated dialogic space that activated all the senses. It also inspired a group of Doenja volunteers immediately to organise a regular Wednesday afternoon walk-in lunch for local people, and to start up a small cooperative catering company.

### Story Kitchen 3.0: photos, stories and songs

Rozien Saleh, who was working at Doenja on behalf of Dock, was convinced that the *Neighbourhood Meal* was a breakthrough for local Muslim women:

In the Middle East, many aspects of culture are closed off from the world, and take place within one's own family. So it was a big step to show yourself in public as they did at the community centre. Some women had to get permission from their husbands to cook at the centre, to have a photo taken, or be filmed. Many women made their own decision to come to *Story Kitchen*. They could do that because they felt safe there; they were protected. They felt strong enough to do it, and the support and attention the organisation gave them was very important (interview with the author, Haarlem, 9 April 2009).

Titia Bouwmeester also stressed the importance of the *Neighbourhood Meal*: "It was the moment when lots of people crossed the threshold the first time. I thought, 'We've got to continue this process'. That's why after that we started taking more time to collect stories and songs from the neighbourhood" (interview with the author, Haarlem, 9 April 2009). And this led to the conversations that had started at the *Neighbourhood Meal* tables continuing in another setting from 25 February to 8 April. The strategy they employed was as simple as it was effective, explained Bouwmeester:

We started off with photographs belonging to the Slachthuisbuurt ward council and the North Holland Archive. They let us just take photos out of their cabinets and hang them here. Then we asked local people to add their own photos and in particular to come and tell the stories behind the photos. This aroused a lot of interest. We were there every Wednesday the whole day long. We had a team of two people scanning the photos and transcribing stories. And all these different sorts of people were coming along with framed photos and shopping bags full of photo albums. There wasn't much left for us to do because they just sat down, opened up their albums, met up with each other and started telling each other stories (ibid.).

One of the transcribers working on the stories people were telling about the photos was Jacqueline Schadee, a reporter for the local digital paper.<sup>46</sup> The stories were printed out and hung up next to the matching photos in the growing exhibition in 5eKwartier's studio. Schadee also placed them on her paper's website. Everyone was benefiting: the local paper was getting extra copy and *Story Kitchen* was getting more material and publicity. She discovered that it was very different from her regular journalistic work:

<sup>46</sup> The district newspaper *Wijkkrant Haarlem Oost* is produced through a collaboration between the regional daily newspaper *Haarlems Dagblad*, the city council and three housing corporations. It employs two journalists who do write and take photographs for their own articles, but their major focus is on getting local people to report on events in their local area.



They came up with the idea of zooming in on people's experiences and memories with the aim of making a site-specific theatre project. What you're looking for most is emotion and the personal perspective because that leads to beautiful stories. One story in particular really affected me. It was from a man who came here who had started off driving deliveries to butchers. He gradually built up an empire, to the point where he had an international livestock transportation company. But something went wrong and, from one day to the next, he was suddenly bankrupt. So then he had to move from his gorgeous canal house to a little flat here in Schalkwijk. That's really going from one extreme to the other. He did start working again at some point – as a driver. It was a very moving (interview with the author, Haarlem, 9 April 2009).

To keep the unexpectedly high level of interest in the photo project on the right track, the decision was taken to cluster groups of people with similar backgrounds. Former abattoir workers were invited to present their stories and photos one week, while other weeks there were people from the Dutch Railways workshop, former shopkeepers, or former pupils from the old school that used to be housed in De Hamelink until 2005. Titia Bouwmeester approached it all with genuine curiosity: "I realise that lots of people with this sort of story have become invisible. The shops have gone, the abattoir has shut down, and the workshop is now just outside the area and it's much smaller. I tell them I think it's important that local people know these stories" (ibid.).

Following a similar pattern to earlier editions of *Story Kitchen*, an artist once again came along to work for six weeks with pupils at the primary school. This time it was the turn of Ulrike Bartels who used photos and stories from the growing exhibition to fire the children's imagination. The children made ingenious objects, and the process culminated with the artist and her young collaborators making an art installation consisting of various sorts of tree trunks, fantasy objects for travelling back in time, and an imaginative structure made of branches and containing small speakers playing fragments of the recorded stories.

While Bartels worked with the children and stories were being collected, Ted van Leeuwen set about gathering melodies for what he calls his *Song Collection Service* (*Liedjesophaaldienst*). Working together with Rozien Saleh ("she manages to recruit people from all kinds of places"), he collected favourite songs from all around the world. He'd sometimes take people away from the *Photo Story Tables* (*Fotoverhalentafels*) or a coffee morning to record a ditty. All Ted van Leeuwen needed was a guitar and a digital recorder:

I tried to get the chords right there and then. I know all the Dutch ones, but I'm really on the lookout for the all-time classics from other cultures. There was an Afghan woman singing with me yesterday evening. I just couldn't make any sense of the melody. And then we did it one more time and I started getting the hang of the rhythm and then suddenly the penny dropped. "Blow me down!" I thought, "That's how it works!" So you make that kind of discovery (interview with the author, Haarlem, 9 April 2009).



Ted van Leeuwen at *Summer Woods*. Photo: Nico Jankowski, 2012.



Ted van Leeuwen created arrangements of these songs from April to June, and put together a band made up of old pals from the Dogtroep days and a professional *oud* player. At the end of May they started rehearsing songs together with children and adults from the local area. On 13 June they performed a successful hour-long concert at the jumble sale in and around the park adjacent to the former abattoir.<sup>47</sup>

The photo story project – also known as *Story Tables* (*Verhalentafels*) – was completed a few weeks before the *Song Collection Service* concert. On Saturday 9 May, Haarlem’s alderman for culture was presented with *Memory of the Abattoir District* (*Geheugen van de Slachthuisbuurt*), a beautifully designed collection of the best and most interesting photos and stories collected in the area in the preceding months. A few copies remained in De Hamelink for viewing. A large number of photos in the book meant that it was a fairly expensive production, but that didn’t deter the many local residents hungry for a copy, and more had to be printed to order. Rozien Saleh, Geja Muffels, production manager Nynke Sluiter and Titia Bouwmeester read out six of the stories at the official presentation, when the De Hamelink “village square” was once again packed with people. A total of 130 people contributed stories and photographs, and there were 1100 visitors to the exhibition.

#### Story Kitchen 4.0: SITE

After the autumn school break in 2009 the focus of *Story Kitchen* shifted to the closing event, a site-specific play performed at five locations around the neighbourhood by professional theatre makers, musicians and artists. The hope was that it would be the final payoff from all the knowledge, goodwill and relationships built up since early December 2007.

On 28 October 2009 a procession of artists, musicians, theatre makers and the production team trooped off into the neighbourhood to meet former workers at the abattoir and the Dutch Railways workshop, as well as former shopkeepers. These distinguished figures in the local area had also participated in the *Story Tables*, and all of them had unique perspectives on a neighbourhood where they had lived and worked for many years, and had seen many changes take place. The artists were asked to work with them – or with other people they met in the ensuing months – on making visual, musical performances lasting no longer than 15 minutes each. In the weeks that followed, they went deep in the neighbourhood and created a theatrical experience based on material that they had either found themselves or drawn from the previous eighteen months of *Story Kitchen* subprojects. Titia described the dramaturgical core of these scenes as a “moment of flux”:

The piece is all about dislocation, about what happens to you when the community that you’re part of disappears. When I left Dogtroep I realised for the first time in my life that my identity exists by the grace of my environment. At Dogtroep we spoke the same language, and shared a stage, a profession, a quest, a path of development. Who I was, was determined by my bonds with

friends and colleagues. I only realised this when it ceased to exist – taking a big piece of me with it. It was like I’d been erased. I was in a state of flux. Ever since, it’s been a thread running through my work to explore what happens to you when you’re in flux. I like to work in communities undergoing change, because you can see people going through something similar, and struggling with their identity. I want to use *SITE* (*STEK*) to present five personalities in flux to the audience (minutes, artistic consultations, De Hamelink, 3 December 2009).

5eKwartier were going to bring their stay in Slachthuisbuurt to a close in January and February with the site-specific performance *SITE*. Each of the five central characters were assembled using information from several people, and each represented a certain population group in the neighbourhood: the children of Moroccan immigrants, former abattoir workers, migrant workers who’d gravitated to the area in the 1950s from the north or east of the country, small shopkeepers, and “import brides” such as the Moroccan women who came to the Netherlands in the 1980s. The five scenes combined to form a rich and multifaceted portrayal of the neighbourhood, and the audience absorbed each of them one by one as they walked from location to location.

The makers worked on their respective scenes for around two months in the setting that best suited their subject matter. Ellen Kromhout and Lotte van Dijck got to work in a cold storage cell and a loading area at the former abattoir. They focused on the same life story of the bankrupted meat transporter Simon Kosse that had so touched journalist Jacqueline Schadee at the *Story Tables*. Ted van Leeuwen created a boarding house on the second floor of a house where his story of Dutch migrants was set. There, he let audience members lie down on bunk beds to listen to the recorded memories of a young migrant from the east of the Netherlands through loudspeakers. Valerie van Leersum and Tommy Freke created their piece *Doenja* in a small house. They used dialogue, images and music to tell the story of a young Muslim woman, assembled from several real-life accounts from different people. In a former butcher’s shop Brigitte Defaix and Ben Lammerts van Bueren performed the tale of a shopkeeper’s daughter who dances the tango for potential buyers of her parents’ shop. And Daniëlle van Vree spoke and sang the “blues” of those Moroccan women who had come to live in the area in the 1980s. The venue was a featureless apartment. Her back towards us, the performer lifted a circular mirror to reflect her face, and the words of the story came not directly from her own mouth, but from a small recorder on the floor. The mirror and the audio source thus provided a double filter.

Although the five scenes were developed independently of one another, their makers consulted regularly with Titia Bouwmeester and dramaturge Floris van Delft. Each week, the on-site artists showed each other the stage they were at and discussed the obstacles they encountered. They also kept a blog to report on the artistic process and interviews with local residents, in an attempt to keep the community informed about this relatively inconspicuous phase of *Story Kitchen* through the dark days before Christmas. Local people were most keenly interested in the shop scene and *Doenja* because rehearsals and other preparations

<sup>47</sup> In the autumn, the band performed their songs at numerous primary schools in Haarlem. There were insufficient financial resources to produce a CD as planned, however.

were taking place at street level. The operational nerve centre throughout this period was the De Hamelink, which hosted production meetings and training for the guides who would take groups of up to twenty-five from site to site on the day of the performances. De Hamelink also marked the start and finish point of *SITE*, where audience members were received at round tables with large laminated maps of the area, and where they could later talk about the events of the day over a mug of hot soup – no mere luxury given that it was extremely cold during the performance period between 20 January and 7 February 2010.

The twenty matinee and evening performances of *SITE* attracted a total audience of more than 1600 people from the local area and far beyond. I saw a full rehearsal on 8 January and three of the actual performances, including the last. Walking from site to site, animated discussions sprang up between outsiders, former residents returning to the area after a long time, and people who had remained in the area their entire lives. At one of the performances I ended up lying on the bunk bed above the Mayor of Haarlem. We listened together to the story of a the Dutch Railways worker from the Achterhoek region while in the hallway Ted van Leeuwen, dressed in 1950s garb, played a melody from the era on an organ. A little later that evening, I saw Rozien Saleh tearfully leaving Valerie van Leersum and Tommy Freke's *Doenja* house. She explained that she had been deeply moved by the film projected on the back wall of migrating reindeer in a desolate landscape. For her they symbolised her own flight from northern Iraq.

#### **Audience survey**

Despite the local audiences having little experience with contemporary theatre idiom, I noticed that they were highly receptive to scenes with an indirect narrative, and that were abstract, stylised and poetic. This impression was born out by the audience survey my colleague Ivana Cerovečki carried out with 97 local people after performances of *SITE*. She concludes in her report that the majority of local people felt *SITE* had made them, “more aware of the changing identity of the neighbourhood”, and that it had, “changed their perceptions of the area and their neighbours” (unpublished survey report, CAL-Utrecht, 2010). This effect was particularly strong among volunteers actively involved in the production, including ticket sellers, caterers and guides. Their enthusiasm about *SITE* and the other parts of *Story Kitchen* was confirmed through in-depth interviews of eight survey respondents carried out six months later out by Cerovečki and myself.

Fifty-seven year old Elissa and 70-year-old Thea regularly helped out behind the bar during *Story Kitchen*. Thea used to work at the abattoir, and she said *SITE* caused a shift in her perspective on the area: “It also taught us about the decline of the local shops we used to go to but have since gone.” Her friend Elissa's strongest memories were of *Doenja*, which had left a deep impression: “I still get shivers down my spine when I'm cycling through the area, and I do wonder, what sort of people are living here, and what's going on up in that third flat? You see some lonely person and you wonder whether they're not daring to go out or whether they're being not allowed out. You look in a different way” (interview with the author, Haarlem, 10 June 2010).

Forty-one year old Herman was a guide for 15 of the 20 performances. In his interview he said he still felt them to be “my baby, too.” His wife Bianca, aged 33, was one of the singers in the *Song Collection Service* concert. Their young daughter, a pupil at De Talenten primary school was a member of the children's choir that sang at the opening of De Hamelink. During the period *Story Kitchen* was in production the entire family had pretty much daily contact with the community centre, something that Herman believes has greatly enriched their lives: “You can feel how much you've gained from it in your life. That's how it feels. It gives your life more substance.” Bianca's clearest visual memory from the performance itself is of bankrupt meat transporter Simon Kosse walking away into a spotlight. She also remembers Daniëlle van Vree and the mirror: “At a certain point she turned around and just started singing. I was at the front and I just thought, ‘Oh my God, what is going on?’” Herman's reaction was similar: “When she turned around I got this feeling like. ‘Pff, is that really necessary?’ Just for a second you feel what she's been going through in her life.” Their least clear recollections are of the *Doenja* house. Bianca believes this was because there was less of a narrative to this piece than others: “Tommy's performance was more about music” (interview with the author, Haarlem, 17 June 2010).

*“You gain self-confidence from working with important people like that. You're suddenly able to do things that before you'd say you couldn't do.”*

Turkish-born Sarha, aged 25, who had been living in the Netherlands for seven years at the time of the interview, viewed *Doenja* very differently: “Tommy and Valerie's story about the young Moroccan girl was what made the biggest impact on me. It was beautiful and the music they used was really lovely as well. And I'll never forget that story with the mirror.” She also gained a lot from the other parts of *Story Kitchen*, and explains that “My Dutch has improved a lot because I've had a lot more contact with Dutch people” (interview with the author, Haarlem, 17 June 2010).

Elly worked on one of the films for *Neighbourhood Meal* and her husband Gerard was a guide for twelve of the performances. She believes his experiences opened him up: “He'd never done anything like leading a group before. He always let me do the talking” (interview with the author, Haarlem, 17 June 2010). And Siham, the *Doenja* volunteer who cooked pastilla, also felt her involvement with the project had made her stronger:

You gain self-confidence from working with important people like that. You're suddenly able to do things that before you'd say you couldn't do. I know now that I can get along with people who have studied, so I can do other things too. Where I grew up, we're not allowed to say “no”. I learned through *Story Kitchen* what to do if I don't want something' (interview with Cerovečki, Haarlem, 17 June 2010).



All the interviewees agreed that the departure of 5eKwartier led to a loss of positive energy in De Hamelink. Herman Bakker was most explicit on this issue: “They should have stayed there. That’s the only way they could keep up the flow of new ideas in the building. Now it’s going under.” He points out that few Dutch people now come, even to the walk-in kitchen. Even Sarha doesn’t go there often anymore: “It’s got more boring. The Dutch and the non-Dutch sit separately now. That’s because they talk Turkish to each other and other groups don’t like it. I agree with them. I’ve noticed that fewer people are going.”

*“That is not just bringing back or recalling the past, but also recreating the past. In the process of looking for those pictures and talking anew about each one that you find, you are creating new stories.”*

#### **Story Kitchen 5.0: meanings**

It’s difficult to express in figures the precise value *Story Kitchen* has had for people living in this neighbourhood. Our conversations in June 2010 with eight actively involved participants suggest that the project as a whole has significantly enriched their lives. Their social contacts intensified, particularly across cultural divides, and by making and critically assessing film, visual art and drama, they increased their creative and technical understanding of artistic processes. In some cases there were also benefits to language skills and self-confidence. For the duration of 5ewartier’s residency, De Hamelink was a vibrant multifunctional community centre, but interviewees referred to the void following the end of the project.

Titia Bouwmeester adds a caveat to that criticism, however:

You’re working in a disrupted community that’s wrought with individual conflicts. We managed in three years to create a place with a soul, where people felt welcome, had a friendly attitude to one another, and joined forces to keep it going. We definitely succeeded in that! And then you get policy-makers asking you how you’re going to preserve it? Back when I was working with Dogtroep nobody ever asked me what the sustainable effect was going to be of a theatre production. I’m totally convinced that our work has lasting importance in the lives of individual audience members and participants. We shared our vision and working method with welfare and teaching professionals, and I can see that having an effect. We also involved policymakers in our work as much as possible, so they could see for themselves the added value of culture and continue investing in it in the future. Ultimately there wasn’t enough of that, so it’s not been possible to ensure an enduring role for culture in De Hamelink (interview, 2012).

5eKwartier were, however, unquestionably successful between late 2007 and early 2010 in bringing together a variety of institutional partners and making a series of moments in which talents and stories from the local area became visible. Their step-by-step approach – from pilot to opening, from *Neighbourhood Meal* to *Story Tables*, and from *Song Collection Service* to the site-specific performance *SITE* – played its part in generating a constant momentum. Time and time again, the organisational and aesthetic qualities of these events (which appealed to all the senses, involved hundreds of local people and attracted thousands) re-energised participants’ eagerness to remain involved in *Story Kitchen*. And the combination of professionally made film documentation (which was made available online), periodic expert meetings, and effective publicity, also sparked interest in the project outside the East Haarlem district.

It was partly for these reasons that on 30 June 2010 at *The Next Step*, a national symposium on the future of community arts, we decided to submit *Story Kitchen* to an international panel. We were interested in discovering what assessment they would give the project when viewed from a variety of academic perspectives. Dr Celiane Camargo Borges is a Brazilian psychologist with a socio-constructivist outlook. She considers *Story Kitchen* to be “much more than people producing art as a way of getting together, more than people connecting. I see people creating new realities together.”<sup>48</sup> The first example Borges looks at is the *Story Cabinet* pilot, in which children were given a camera to interview their mothers. She points out that this situation created a new role for the participant – as an interviewer rather than as a child. “Their relationship has shifted”, she explains. “They are exercising new ways of being together, which allows new kinds of actions and therefore generates new kinds of realities.” Borges’ attention was also drawn to a similar phenomenon at *The Story Tables*, when local residents used photos to immerse themselves in the history of the area: “That is not just bringing back or recalling the past, but also recreating the past. In the process of looking for those pictures and talking anew about each one that you find, you are creating new stories.”

Borges identifies a direct link between the participatory approach of *Story Kitchen* and the notion of “empowerment”, a term commonly used to encompass improvements to social and existential self-determination: “We thus switch the objective of our inquiry from trying to find a single truth, or a single agreement, to creating understanding. We don’t need to agree all the time, but we can be tolerant of difference, more appreciative of it ... [the project was] very creative in building conversational space where people could create stories and through it all create new actions and through that, new realities.”

Jan Cohen-Cruz, the American professor of theatre studies whom I cited in previous chapters, looks at community arts from the perspective of performance studies. She sees *Story Kitchen* as a complex two-year reciprocal relationship between artist and community: “Some things that happen during that time are more pointed and get more attention and others receive less. But you’re not

<sup>48</sup> All quotes from *The Next Step* are drawn directly from transcripts of video recordings of a special session of the Community Arts Lab that we held there.

saving everything that can happen for the final performance, for the theatre piece, for the event with the public. All of it has value.” Cohen-Cruz believes these activities are reflected in the long-term relationships and personal connections forged by the project. Although she echoes the observation that the artists’ departure from De Hamelink meant the disappearance of an important connecting factor, she believes that this type of work is all about “key positive experiences. Sometimes art provides a way, sometimes going on a difficult journey together does that.” Cohen-Cruz therefore sees the walk-in kitchen as an important outcome of the enterprise, because “there is the possibility for art to come back into it. Part of what was interesting about our trip to Haarlem yesterday and being taken through the project was that it was obvious that it was continuing. At a certain point, we were all sitting around a table. Rozien had made this wonderful soup, we were all eating together, which, of course, is a quintessential community experience, and we began spontaneously telling each other stories. So there were new stories again and so this process keeps going in different forms. It’s not like it has to wait for there to be a stage for that to happen.”

*“Our projects are consciously focused on the opposite, on harmony. I can operate in harmony, not in conflict.”*

The Indian theatre scholar Dr. Sruti Bala identifies a number of principles of systemic thinking operating in *Story Kitchen*.<sup>49</sup> “The first principle is thinking in network structures and dynamic frames. Here it means that the project did not simply regard ‘community’ as a setting, something you merely walk into with the project, but more in an ecological way as a system in which you enter and which in turn becomes part of the artistic work.” Bala bases these conclusions on the long-term relationships 5eKwartier built up with local residents, the school headmaster, the housing corporation, and Rozien and Geja. They demonstrate the use of systemic thought, the notion that one should seek entry points for participation or contribution rather than trying to do everything alone. Bala describes as “dynamic frames” the artists’ attention to apparently insignificant details from the past that were subsequently magnified in the five scenes that were part of the site-specific performance.

Bala goes on to explain that a second principle underlying systemic thinking is the creation of circumstances whereby quality is assessed internally rather than being imposed by an external authority: “It didn’t prompt me to ask questions like, ‘Is this good work?’, or, ‘Is this good art?’, in response to the flags that were put up or the music the children made. It was clear to me that the aesthetic standards they developed in the course of this project were the reflection

49 Bala draws on the following source for her remarks related to systemic thinking: Oliver Wils, Ulrike Hopp, Norbert Ropers, Luxshi Vimalarajah, Wolfram Zunzer, eds., 2006. *The Systemic Approach to Conflict Transformation. Concepts and Fields of Application*. Berlin: Berghof Foundation for Peace Support, 2006. [http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/publications/SCT\\_Systemic\\_Conflict\\_Transformation\\_Complete.pdf](http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/publications/SCT_Systemic_Conflict_Transformation_Complete.pdf)

of learning processes that people had made in that time.” Bala believes that as a consequence the project struck a balance between “effect” and “affect”, or between benefits in the social realm and the far less readily quantified feeling it evoked in the personal realm.

Bala compliments the artists on their problem-solving focus on the “how” rather than the “why” of any given situation. This too is a characteristic of systemic thought: “Rather than explaining the reasons why something is the way it is, why there is social exclusion for example, they worked constructively with the circumstances.” A fourth principle, closely related to this point, is the rejection of insights as absolutes: “Every system or model is necessarily a reduction of reality. It is not a comprehensive overview. The photo project did not claim to write the definitive history of Slachthuisbuurt. It very much openly said that this is a collection of stories, that they highlight certain perspectives, but that there are other perspectives as well.”

Bala finds no evidence in *Story Kitchen* of the fifth principle of systemic thinking: the presence of conflict and tension – although she found it difficult to believe that there had been no conflicts at all throughout the two-year project. Our own interviews with the volunteers bear out the suspicion that there were indeed tensions, and that these still exist. Bouwmeester accepts this, but stresses that her approach is consciously dedicated to the fostering of positive energy.<sup>50</sup> “Large numbers of people in the area are angry. They feel neglected and believe that politicians aren’t listening to them. So they just lean back. If they don’t have a job, then it’s always someone else who’s to blame. But if I were to focus on that, that feeling would only grow. Our projects are consciously focused on the opposite, on harmony. I can operate in harmony, not in conflict.”

This last statement by Titia Bouwmeester confirms her defining role as artistic director of *Story Kitchen*. It was she who selected the location and the partners with whom she would work. It was she who came up with the concepts for the subprojects in the closing production. But she left plenty of room for her colleagues and partners such as Muffels, Saleh and Barnhoorn, and hundreds of local people to make their contribution. In *Story Kitchen* there was no question of Kwon’s exoticising exploitation of socially neglected minority groups (2004, 138–139) or underestimation of the inherent strength and complexity of the local community (ibid, 144). *SITE* in particular saw 5eKwartier using high-quality site-specific performance as a tool to successfully reach out to population groups entirely unfamiliar with the mainstream arts. This could only be achieved because local people had come to see the artists as temporary neighbours with whom they had created memorable experiences in the preceding period in and around De Hamelink, and because they saw their own stories represented in a respectful way in *SITE*.

50 In *Engaging Performance* (London: Routledge, 2010) Cohen-Cruz describes this as the “asset-based” approach, achieved through boosting the strengths and resources already present in the community concerned (116).

At the end of 2012, 5eKwartier set up permanent office on Hannie Schaftstraat, in the building where Brigitte Defaix and Ben Lammerts van Bueren had performed their tango tribute to the long-gone shopkeeper, as part of *SITE*. It is situated on the boundary between Slachthuisbuurt and Parkwijk, where the arts organisation has embarked on *East Canteen* the follow-up project to *Story Kitchen*. This new enterprise is a direct outcome of *Story Kitchen*. Aad van der Aken, who was the municipal area manager for the eastern suburbs of Haarlem, had recognised 5eKwartier's ability to connect partners and local residents productively during *Story Kitchen*. "Unfortunately, he died last year", explains Titia Bouwmeester:

He was an unconventional bloke – the sort of person who followed his intuition and didn't just want to know what the outcome would be or how sustainable the plan was. He believed in our enthusiasm and vision. In the *Story Kitchen* period he applied for extra funding from the ministry for the Zomer Zone (Summer Zone), which is our part of East Haarlem. He reserved a small portion of that budget for a repeat version of *Story Kitchen* in Parkwijk. So he used those resources to ask us to develop a new project (interview, 2012).

*“There's huge reluctance here in Parkwijk to accept anything coming in from outside, even more so than in Slachthuisbuurt. We've been able to break through it by showing that we really mean business – by working on it for three years.”*

The context was completely different from just a couple of hundred yards away in the Slachthuisbuurt district, so *East Canteen* has developed into a very different kind of project. And there is no community centre here comparable with De Hamelink. Parkwijk is a post-war neighbourhood with a high population turnaround and plenty of frustration and fragmentation. "Because we're a sort of clown figure and still, despite everything, an outsider, we are able to connect diverse groups there to an event" (ibid.). The local park that gives the area its name is the central focus of this artistic process of connection through participation. Titia Bouwmeester's greatest challenge has been to eliminate the mistrust from local people: "There's huge reluctance here in Parkwijk to accept anything coming in from outside, even more so than in Slachthuisbuurt. We've been able to break through it by showing that we really mean business – by working on it for three years" (ibid.).

*East Canteen* owes its success to sincere commitment and playful creativity. The park is set for redevelopment over the coming years, and there was a great deal of anger among local people about the felling of trees. Titia Bouwmeester came up with a plan to offer people a young sapling in a planter:

I was looking for an opportunity to get our theatre makers into contact and conversation with local people. So I came up with the idea of giving anyone who wanted one a tree to take care of, in exchange for their life story. The tree itself is also a good trigger for getting into conversation with people. You can ask questions like, "Where are your roots, who are you now, what do you stand for, which way are your branches growing, what are your dreams for the future?" It helps them to take ownership of the new woods in the park. We also organise all sorts of activities relating to the trees they're growing at home (ibid.).

These events are warm, inclusive and tastefully designed neighbourhood festivals similar to the events mentioned at the start of this chapter. 5eKwartier marks each season at this micro level with a blend of music, theatre and visual and culinary arts, providing a poetic reflection of local people's resilience, and helping them get a firmer grasp on their living environment. But ultimately 5eKwartier's community arts trees need to take root on the macro level, ensuring that the residents of Parkwijk truly take ownership of their park. Titia Bouwmeester believes this will only take place once existing political structures have been breached. "Our projects take place on the cutting edge between culture, welfare, urban development and the environment, so lots of different municipal councillors are responsible. That means we don't have one single ambassador who's totally committed to this project. It makes it very difficult to look forward into the future" (ibid.).

Let's hope that the ambassador makes himself or herself known pretty soon, because at the moment it looks as if Haarlem is insufficiently aware of the golden opportunity 5eKwartier is presenting them. This group with roots in one of the most spectacular site-specific theatre companies our country has ever known has embedded itself with passion, grit and a pioneering spirit on the eastern edge of the city. Over the past five years, it has developed an innovative and effective model that produces beautiful art that really matters. But these activities require an energy level that the artists will surely be unable to maintain year in, year out.



## ***7. Making sense***

**In John Irving's novel *Last Night in Twisted River* the author's fictional alter ego, writer Daniel Baciagalupo, searches for 50 years for the final sentence of his story. It is a search that will be familiar to any writer.**

The sentence with which I wish to conclude this book should, I feel, contain phrases such as, "In the Netherlands of 2013, community arts is the cutting edge of politically engaged art", or "The crisis will be raging for a long while yet and Dutch society needs community arts more than ever, because there is no better way to get artistry and creativity flowing into every section of society." And that sentiment should be combined with, "And if you want to demonstrate that capacity, then you're going to need community arts laboratories and do more than carry out purely sociological assessment." Brought together, however, they sound unwieldy and complacent. What's more, they don't do the subject justice.

No matter how hard I strain my mind to find the right words, the Utrecht Community Arts Lab will only achieve its true potential value through the city itself: through its inhabitants and through the art they get involved in at unexpected locations in the coming years. What this book and the accompanying videos demonstrate is that, at their best, community arts are far more than mere creative tinkering in the margins, or veiled social work spiced up with a soupçon of artiness. If this is to be fully understood, a paradigm shift will be necessary, as Grant Kester (2008, 172) rightly claims, in order to arrive at an understanding of art that integrates rather than drives a wedge between the social and the purely artistic dimensions of art; that does not distinguish between process and product, but sees each of them as aspects of a single whole; that sometimes even dares to look beyond the scope of a single project, and views the long-term relationship between artists and the community as a multilayered socio-artistic fabric with a variety of manifestations and climaxes; that does not on the one hand prejudge participatory processes involving ordinary people as conservative or of low value, or on the other hand prejudge individual and autonomous art works as naturally pioneering, disruptive or challenging; that looks not only at the social *effect*, but also – setting statistics to one side – at the instinctive, emotional *affect* that people feel in their heart and their gut and that is unmeasurable – and for which there are no precise words.

This book and film package counterpoints the researchers' voices with those of the artists, and sketches a proposal for an embedded form of art criticism. We at CAL-Utrecht want to make it clear that this work is the expression of a remarkable artistic discipline. We want to achieve that by becoming insiders, working alongside artists – and sometimes participants – to reconstruct the social and artistic dimensions of community arts processes. The community artist works according to certain self-imposed rules consciously founded on specific principles. Just as the traditional painter chooses to work using brush, canvas and oil paint and to be judged according to criteria based on that discipline's limitations, community artists also want to be judged in accordance with the rules of their own game. One might define their discipline as follows: to work conscientiously,

either ad hoc or according to a predetermined plan, on a reciprocal relationship with ordinary people to produce work with aesthetic and social resonance within the context in which it is made, and perhaps beyond it. This framework allows for all manner of approaches and forms. This highly variegated spectrum arches from the artist operating almost entirely autonomously (who incorporates a minimal amount of space for participation in pre-devised artistic concepts) to the artist who enters a context with an entirely open mind and only later develops a concept based on material emanating from a community. Particularly artists who want to work in local communities while also attaching a value to status within the mainstream art circuit or conventional quality norms tend to the former, more autonomous model. They often find it difficult to generate sustainable support within the neighbourhood concerned. They are also frequently engaged in a struggle to develop an aesthetic language that suits both their own taste (or that of fellow artists in the mainstream art circuit) and that of non-artist members of the community with little interest in art. This trend – which is more ephemeral than some other forms of community arts, but not necessarily less valuable – is most thoroughly explored in this book in the chapters on *Expedition New West* and *Yo! Opera*.

*“Jan Cohen-Cruz takes the words right out of my mouth when she laments that she longs ‘to see the end of assumptions ... that applied/community-based theatre is necessarily high on the useful end of the spectrum’.”*

The social and artistic values of community arts lie hidden among the countless details of processes that last months and sometimes years – both in tangible musical, dramatic or visual experiences of beauty, and in less tangible moments such as when an artist has an emotional midnight telephone conversation with a participant in order to smooth out the process. The five main chapters demonstrate that the value of community arts is never black or white. It is a multiplicity of shades in a multicoloured pallet. For example, the fact that a community arts enterprise enjoys a high level of participation or social purpose does not presuppose that it is “artistically weak”. The reverse is also true. Jan Cohen-Cruz takes the words right out of my mouth when she laments that she longs “to see the end of assumptions not only that applied/community-based theatre is necessarily high on the useful end of the spectrum, but also that usefulness is in inverse proportion to aesthetics – that is, that high on the one scale means low on the other” (2010, 8). But that doesn't mean to say that there is no truth at all to such assumptions. More than once I have witnessed how nobody would mention an actor's poor performances because the simple fact that he or she was on stage was a wonder in itself considering the turbulent process preceding it. Kate Crehan correctly points out that in the 1970s and '80s there were quite a few badly designed and carelessly executed community arts initiatives for which participation was the only

valid criterion and which disregarded artistic quality (2011, 194). And still today there are those community artists or project leaders who aggressively dismiss any form of art criticism with the argument that all that really matters is their good intentions for society. As early as 1996 Miwon Kwon described this shortsighted attitude as adopting a “halo-like armature of social do-goodism” (quoted in Kuppers 2007, 197). Good community arts will stand up to the test of rigorous criticism, however, as long as it employs a broader range of criteria than those applied to mainstream arts.

The Indian art theorist Rustom Bharucha picked up on this issue back in late 2007 in a CAL-Utrecht webcast:

Now we can agree quite readily that you can't use the same criteria that you use for established art, which has got millions and millions of dollars behind it. There is a different set of criteria that are needed, which should not be patronising or condescending: “because it is community arts therefore we will tolerate it.” Make no excuses, but judge it on its own terms. ... [Speaking of inmates performing in South African prisons] my friend Chris Hurst said they were excellent. I said: “Surely you are exaggerating and that category of excellence should not be used?” He said: “No, I know what I mean because I have seen excellence.” He had Vanessa Redgrave in mind and all the great performers. Yet he said, “We are seeing a different kind of excellence at work here, a different kind of chemistry.” But as critics we don't have an adequate language to define the criteria (transcribed from [vimeo.com/29316621](https://vimeo.com/29316621)).

Later, after observing the acting of the inmates with his own eyes, Bharucha invoked categories such as the “subversive truth” in the acting, and the “intensity” of the performances he saw in the Westville Correctional Facility (personal interview with Chris Hurst, Durban, 14 March 2008). On the same occasion he also spoke of qualities such as the concentration, focus, energy, immediacy, and clarity that he detected in the acting of the South Africans. Between the lines he was alluding to a quality in the ability of the facilitating artist (in this case Hurst, but he could as easily have been speaking about Donna Risa) to activate and nurture an intrinsic force in the participants, and to cast it in the most powerful artistic form possible. The performances that Albert, Lien, Catherina and Bea gave in *Máxima's Coming!* were sometimes excellent. But sometimes they were less so. And at such moments it was clear that some aspect of the preparation or form (be that style or set design, for example) had a temporary shortcoming caused by an unfortunate artistic choice or a complication in the dynamics of the group. As a commentator, one must identify and define its causes within the context of the entire enterprise, including the relationships, dialogues and capacities for empathy that have been built up and that form an inextricable part of the artistic process.

One criterion of quality that can be applied – with the appropriate flexibility – to projects that see professional artists representing the experiences of people living in working class neighbourhoods, is the extent to which their intrinsic power is successfully expressed without excessive manipulation and exploitation. Good examples of this phenomenon include the monologue by the Turkish actor Sinan Cihangir in *Expedition New West* and the scenes developed by 5eKwartier

in East Haarlem. Any attempt to fathom this specific quality requires the spectator to look beyond the technical aspects of performance and design. Other aspects must also be considered, such as the quality of the relationship between the artist and the people who inspired the work – and who are most deeply invested in the subject matter. So there is nothing wrong in itself with judging Tommy Freke's saxophone technique in the *Doenja* scene in *SITE*, but if you want to do justice to the project as a whole, it will be necessary to tie in his performance with the visual rhythm of the on-screen video; the design of the venue; the hot tea served to as you enter by a friendly local volunteer; the authentic voice of an anonymous Moroccan girl from the Slachthuisbuurt narrating *Doenja* through a loudspeaker; the months of collaborative work between her, Freke and the artist Valerie van Leersum; the other scenes from the same site-specific production; the conversations that take place as you walk from one venue to the other; and the almost two years of participatory artistic activities that preceded it. And you must also evaluate the level of expertise with which the images, sounds, smells, flavours and tangible elements that make up *Doenja* were combined to create an aesthetic experience that appealed equally to trained artists and to local people with no specific interest in art – this project did, after all, have the explicit aim of communicating with both groups. And if you do all of this, you will see that it was beautiful, compelling, moving, sincere and disruptive, because it set everyone thinking, whether or not they lived in the local area. And last but not least, you will realise that the apparently simple task carried out by guides such as Gerard and Herman is actually a demonstration of that robust reciprocal relationship which is the very foundation of this kind of work. The subtext of their active physical presence was this: “What Valerie and Tommy are doing here is for us as well and we want to be part of it.” CAL-Utrecht has endeavoured to document this remarkable interaction between local people and artists during the process of making community arts in East Haarlem, in Geuzenveld in Amsterdam, and in Rivierenwijk and Overvecht in Utrecht.

*“And if you do all of this, you will see that it was beautiful, compelling, moving, sincere and disruptive, because it set everyone thinking, whether or not they lived in the local area.”*

Although we encountered a high level of mutual exchange in *Máxima's Coming!* in Utrecht that was similar to what we had seen in East Haarlem, we also observed that the aesthetic experience it engendered was primarily aimed at audience members from working class neighbourhoods such as Rivierenwijk. In such cases, there is a less compelling requirement for a multifunctional aesthetic language that communicates with diverse audiences. In *Expedition New West* or the various community opera projects undertaken by Yo!, however, there was an even greater emphasis on this criterion than in *SITE*, but Yo! did not establish reciprocal relationships between artists and local people that were robust enough to support





a substantial sense of co-ownership among the latter group. The reader can infer from the chapters that discuss these projects that this may have been due to competing ambitions, an overemphasis on top-down thinking, and an underestimation of the importance of certain fundamental principles. It all goes to show that even with thorough preparation – such as building reliable local contacts, establishing an easily accessible base of operations, responding to a compelling need or demand from the community, conducting rigorous analysis of the context at micro and macro level, and being visibly present in the community – the work itself is already difficult enough.

This book and the films that accompany it are not an attempt to demonstrate that there is a single magical, flawless and replicable method for doing this work successfully. There are countless models that each have their own merits. If we are to assess quality more thoroughly, then as well as an artistic paradigm shift there is a need for an altered governmental perspective that takes on board unconventional civil servants, urban planners and other officials whose first question is not what the project will produce at a societal level, and whose first act is not an attempt to place it in a specific policy pigeonhole. What is needed at local and national authority level is people who understand that the true art is the ability to repeatedly come up with new approaches that are most appropriate to a specific artist and a specific situation, and people who recognise that it is impossible to distil a single simple truth that can be reduced to a set of figures. The goal must be to generate useful and relevant art in places where it is otherwise seldom or never found: art that enables people to express themselves on their own terms or, if it is being done by others, enables them to make a substantial contribution; art that brings beauty, creativity and self-reflection to places where it is most needed; art that must be judged by its dialogical, relational and aesthetic qualities and not by the quantity of new intercultural contacts it instigates in a deprived area – although it will surely be more successful in this than a performance of Mahler's Symphony No.1 at the Concertgebouw.

*“What is needed at local and national authority level is people who understand that the true art is the ability to repeatedly come up with new approaches that are most appropriate to a specific artist and a specific situation.”*

Community art is a distinct phenomenon within the Dutch arts sector. It generates innovative arts in unexpected locations with unusual grassroots supporters who participate in innovative ways. It is impossible to pass generalised judgements on the phenomenon because each relationship from which it draws produces different dialogues and different art. Even the tempting assumption that the full-time community artist permanently residing in a specific neighbourhood is more effective than an outsider who looks in every once in a while needs in reality

to be more nuanced. That's because an outsider can sometimes more easily break open entrenched alliances and local interests than an insider. What's more, in neighbourhoods where people are sick of empty promises it can also be good for the local community to have a short one-off period of intense focus culminating in a wonderful final climax. Fleeting enterprises and fragments of memories of a magical moment have an equal but different value to stories with a more concrete narrative. It is, then, not necessary for local people actually to stand on stage or to hold the brush if they wish to secure co-ownership of community arts. But if a professional is doing it for them, there should be reciprocity and recognition of local inspiration and perspiration. Without grassroots support you won't get anywhere. It doesn't matter whether you choose a participatory or representational model, working in the arts in local communities is always unpredictable and heavy going. It drains the energy of the artists involved to such an extent that they frequently need to find other channels to recharge themselves creatively and emotionally. But at the same time it also yields a great deal for both parties: new perspectives on life, intimate knowledge of other ways of life, and surprising, affecting and worthwhile art that feeds society from within.

Art made through collaboration between professional artists and ordinary people has been around for a long time and can be found all over the world. The history of community arts bears witness to a variety of traditions that bring forth fascinating narratives on the cultural dimensions of emancipation, decolonisation and other struggles against inhumanity. The chapter about the Sint Maarten celebration in Utrecht explores just such a fascinating line, one whose roots reach back in time through Dogtroep, Welfare State International and Bread & Puppet to the Western avant-garde that had its heyday just after the Second World War. Although this tradition sometimes connects with cultural traditions with far more ancient roots, it is by no means about preservation when it comes to form and style. And despite the fact that it does respect certain principles, this is not due to a fear of the unknown. Rather, it harbours a deep and generous sense of humanity, a respect for nature, a resistance to injustice, boundless imagination, the courage to be different, limitless curiosity, and an irresistible drive to present the remarkable in the everyday in a form that is accessible to all in public places.

The artists this book and video package focuses on possess the temperament, commitment, stamina and courage required to do this challenging work. Sometimes they make bad judgements, have bad luck or simply burn out. But if they do their work well and the tide of the times is with them, then they succeed in generating creative, respectful, critical, and nuanced intercultural and intracultural communication that would never come about at a comparably intensive level in any other way. If the researcher is to do justice to this phenomenon, then he or she must get out into the field to document it in all its glory – and in all its doubts, blunders and contradictions.

Community artists find themselves walking the fine line between mainstream arts and the world of ordinary people. Their work is a search for aesthetic languages that speaks to both worlds. Their continual, courageous, and energy-intensive attempts to find that ever shifting balance between the social and the artistic,

and between effect and affect, is the essence of community arts. If that temporary balance is found – if the two scales are equally filled with challenging and powerful material – it creates, as John Fox so beautifully put it, “social poetry of a high order within a very specific community context.”

This social poetry was to be found in all five enterprises documented in this book: in the “Song of the 22 Stab Wounds” sung by Catherina; in Marwan's reaction as he watched his opera *Cousin Murat from Groningen* (*Neef Murat uit Groningen*) being performed in the doorway of a flat in Overvecht; in the huge photo hung on an outdoor wall on the Lambertus Zijlplein in Geuzenveld that shows a Surinamese woman walking through a nursing home, hand-in-hand with the young girl visiting her; in the melody of a new Sint Maarten song that engraved itself on the memory when combined with the huge accompanying figure of a man on a horse; and in the strip of lace from a bridal gown incorporated in a tablecloth at a *Neighbourhood Meal* in Haarlem. Each of these five details is but a strand in the fabric of a far greater story interwoven with remarkable relationships, painful frustrations, ingenious solutions, folly, and magical moments. We have recorded that overarching narrative here. It is a story that artists and participants carry with them but one that all too rarely reaches the heart of the institutional stakeholders concerned. And although this documentation could doubtless have been carried out in a more effective way – particularly with respect to integrating sociological research – we are convinced that it is more complete than data solely based on social growth. We also believe that it must be possible to explore and chart more fully that territory between the social and the poetic; that precarious moment of temporary balance. It is only by doing so that we will improve our understanding of the importance of the most relevant art available today.

Our quest is therefore far from over.





Cardboard art at the Zinneke Parade in Brussels, Belgium. Photo: Eugène van Erven, 2012.



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