

A Conversation with **Sarah Vanhee**

Tom Van Imschoot

In recent years, Sarah Vanhee has become known for performances and artistic inventions that open up space for radical imagination, both on and off stage. In *Oblivion* (2015), she unpacked all the 'waste' that she had produced in the course of a year, in a slow-moving, horizontal meditation over value and superfluosity, the possession and disposal of objects with regard to who we are. In *Lecture For Every One* (2013), which is today still on international tour, she barges in like an uninvited guest on the most diverse of meetings (town councils, company meetings, choir rehearsals, football practice...) to make an unannounced speech about

everyone living together and creating together, the individual and the collective, about alternative fictions. For Vanhee, artistic practice clearly touches her engagement as a citizen. Yet, how does that practice remain viable in an art world that has internationalized to an untenable degree? "Forget all promotional language. It is about whose voices you reinforce and what language you speak yourself."

The Need ^{for} a Different Language.

It was really remarkable. Everyone I asked felt that I definitely had to speak to Sarah Vanhee (b. 1980) in my search for artistic practices that enrich our idea of 'internationalization'. Her own reaction to the proposal was actually rather sceptical, however she not only had some distrust of a request to speak about something as general as the 'internationalization of the art field', even if it was in the context of her own work experience. She moreover felt that it would be far more appropriate to speak with one of the many non-Belgian artists who have been living in Brussels longer than she has, someone such as Anna Rispoli, for example, with whom she has great affinity. Or Mette Edvardsen, with whom she founded the collaborative support structure, *Anyone*, in 2013, together with fellow artists Alma Söderberg and Juan Dominguez. "There are so many artists from so many corners of the world who see Brussels as their city, their scene, but people still tend to reach out for Flemish voices to talk about it. This ignores or negates the real internationalization, while Brussels precisely teaches all of us to see it not as a problem, but as an everyday given."

The interview with Sarah Vanhee is only one out of a small series, focused on diverse profiles. But the sensitivity that she spreads about her does indeed expose something about her way of being. Hers is a sensitivity to multiple voices, as is also evident in a name such *Anyone*, and as such, it is more specifi-

cally expressed in the pluriform, different language spoken in her work. Vanhee's artistic practice is indeed many in one, not easily captured in a single idea. She initially studied Word Art at the Lemmens Institute in Leuven – where she was eventually advised against ever speaking on stage again, a judgment that still leaves her speechless. But she found her artistic niche, and the encouragement she sought, notably at the Mime School in Amsterdam. Since then, it is no doubt no coincidence that her work embraces a friction between speaking and not speaking, between dominant discourse and what is not voiced by it.

Whether Vanhee tries to be too fast for her own thoughts by speaking them out 'on the spot', allowing experts to comment on them, as in *Turning Turning (A Choreography of Thoughts)*, a performance from 2011, or whether she is making a film with prison detainees in which she allows them to fantasize a scenario for a crime film, and by way of that fiction, reflect out loud about facts and imagination, justice and rules (*The Making of Justice*, 2017), time and time again, she seeks out unheard language that liberates our concept being from uniform thinking about identity. In Vanhee's artistic practice, art in general, and fiction in particular, create a space in which a different kind of speaking, an unheard thinking, can come to the fore and is made public, out from under the under the dominant, familiar narrative. Through fiction and friction, in other words, Vanhee

questions the power over language as a way of envisioning the world.

This makes her work not only highly political, but closely linked to her engagement as a citizen, too, focused on intervening in the division between who does and who does not get to say something in public. It also ensures a diversity of media in her work, which couples performance to fine art, film and literature, and which unfolds both inside and outside the traditional art institute. For to allow a different speaking to express itself, and to propose an alternative fiction, Vanhee must always be in search of the specific form and environment that her material requires. It was, to give an example, from the questioning of the value of art in society and the status of the object in art itself that, in 2012, her performance installation *Untitled* took the form of encounters in private homes. Or more recently, it was from speaking with prisoners that the idea of a film presented itself – not out of any preconceived

ambition to make a film.

All this means that listening – and reading its literary variant – is crucial to Sarah Vanhee's artistic practice: the willingness and also the skill to make space in one's own language for the voices of others, thereby also for a potentially different language and way of speaking. This sometimes assumes literal translations, as in *I Screamed and I Screamed and I Screamed* (2013), a lecture performance and video installation in which Vanhee made the screaming of prisoners reverberate, safely silenced and invisible as they were behind a prison wall in Mechelen. Yet her listening also has a critical relationship to the discourse of the art world itself, an art world which, in particular, is now dominated by the call for 'internationalization' – and whoever does not heed that call faces being left out in the cold. Does Vanhee meet that demand? Does she speak the discourse of internationalization? Or is she able to translate it in a way we hardly ever talk about it?

Everybody is an outsider when speaking English, except native speakers. Everybody is a dilettante. That ensures a democratic dimension. **We are almost all equally hopeless**, and it is only when a native speaker is present that you suddenly realize that again.

Following your study in Leuven, you found your artistic niche at the Mime School in Amsterdam and you got on track. Did that have to do with the international environment in which you found yourself?

Sarah Vanhee: It was primarily about a different educational climate, one of encouragement rather than belittlement. It was my experience that at the time, schools for performing arts were much better in the Netherlands than in Flanders. More professional. Their international character did not have so much to do with it as such, because if you decide on an education for the theatre, you are automatically language-bound. By starting my second study, I discovered how relative the judgment from my previous environment had been. I learned that as a student and as an artist, you must follow your own path. By choosing mime, I quickly came into contact with people from other countries, outside Europe as well. I thought that was a positive thing, but not because it was international, as if that were some kind of a value in its own right.

What did you find to be positive about it?

I have always felt better in spaces where there is plurality, where there is not simply a single perspective or background. I have an intuitive distrust of environments that are too uniform. I find them suffocating, uninspiring.

So in that sense, Amsterdam gave you room to breathe?

In Amsterdam, I was a foreigner myself, and my own perspective was questioned. The people with whom I came in contact were moreover often from the dance world, and that is in any case an international scene. When I began to create my own work as a performer, I immediately found myself in an international scene. I have always felt at home there, thanks to the plurality and diversity that is inherent to it. If you only work in

Flanders or the Netherlands, you never get anywhere, but due to the performance scene I got involved in, I no longer needed to make the leap to the international field.

So by leaving behind your familiar environment you found your true home as an artist?

You could put it that way, yes. For I realize right now that the same principle is also found in my work. My work is always about questioning the dominant culture and politics: what is the dominant discourse and how can I break that open and seek out the polyphony? For that reason, I always prefer to be and to remain an outsider. In that sense, it is no doubt no coincidence that I have always worked in English, ever since I started making work in which language plays a role, however intuitively that took place. I was getting away from Dutch, with which I was totally familiar, but in which I did not feel comfortable.

Is English not automatically the lingua franca of the dominant internationalization discourse?

Yet, unfortunately there is this connotation; it would perhaps be better for it to be Spanish or Arabic. Today, among colleagues, we ask ourselves why we keep finding ourselves speaking English again, when everybody present also speaks French, for example. But that is not my point. What it is about for me is that everybody is an outsider in that language, except of course the native speakers. Everybody is a dilettante. That ensures a democratic dimension. We are almost all equally hopeless when we speak English, and it is only when a native speaker is present that you suddenly realize that again. So I am certainly no linguistic purist. What I find interesting is just the fact that for almost everyone, English is not a non-native language: it puts everyone on an equal footing.

Does the fact that nearly everyone is not at home in the language they are sharing imply a political promise in its own right? Does that also determine your vision of 'internationalization'?

I have not thought about it in those terms, and I also want to be very cautious about connecting it to internationalization, but the open perspective on language, as a source of equality and therefore as a space for diversity, no doubt explains my aversion to the often closed character of the artistic world in Flanders and the Netherlands. I guess that seclusion is at its worst in the literary scene, as I have already discovered. But let me stick to the performing arts, which is what I know best. For my work, I always choose the form that the material demands, but the material also requires a suitable environment. That means that for a long time now, because of the political weight of the material, I have been doing projects that take place outside the traditional institutions or venues. I actually did not feel at home in the theatre. It was as if that framework was holding my imagination prisoner, even neutralizing it, certainly in the political sense. It was only with *Oblivion* that I rediscovered the theatre as a place where radical imagination is possible.

With the radical aspect of that imagination, you mean that there is also a political dimension inherent to it?

Yes. On the one hand, within the existing art space, I want to continue experimenting with different forms, because we simply have a need for new imagination and stories. But on the other hand, as a socially engaged citizen, I want to be able to do much more. It comes down to thinking the two together, especially since I have also come to realize that there has been a limit to the durability of my projects outside the classical theatre. For that reason, in the future, I want to set up a project that is longer-lasting, in the city where I live. That is where

the issue of internationalization gets in. For me, internationalization has nothing to do with expanding your action radius beyond the limits of the city or the country where you live, but with a recognition of what is plural and international within that city or country, in short, within in your own environment. In Brussels, that plurality is very present. It is why I have fallen in love with Brussels. On the one hand, there is the impossibility of living with one another, and on the other the potential to do it anyhow, in one way or other, to make it work, through a practice or a way of living. For the future, there is a lot to be learned from that.

What especially can be learned from it?

Cosmopolitan citizenship, I think, living together within a real global context. Therein also lies the challenge for the performing arts, where internationalization is concerned. I have discovered that my work can take place within the phenomena of arts centres and theatres that are internationally interconnected. But that also means that I can be on stage in Brussels, then Timisoara, and Tallinn, and that every time, I am standing before a kind of same, predominantly 'bobo' audience. The geographical location does not make much difference. It is not about geography, but about demographics, about the question of which population groups you can or cannot appeal to. In that sense, I find that the dimension of the 'international' is always filled in too generically. *Lecture for Every One* was a reaction to that phenomenon: I personally decided to go to very specific communities in a particular city. For me, it is much more interesting to work for an extended time at a single location, in an arts centre, or if need be, in a tiny village, than to be in front of audiences that are supposedly international, but are in fact interchangeable.

I have discovered that my work can take place within the phenomena of arts centres and theatres that are internationally interconnected. But that also means that I can be on stage in Brussels, then Timisoara, and Tallinn, and that every time, I am standing before a kind of same, predominantly 'bobo' audience. The geographical location does not make much difference. **It is not about geography, but about demographics, about the question of which population groups you can or cannot appeal to.** In that sense, I find that the dimension of the 'international' is always filled in too generically.

So in reaction to a certain form of internationalization, you want to work more locally?

I want to work more locally in order to address the real, existing plurality within that given locale. The would-be 'international' is sometimes more restricting than the plurality that I can appeal to within a single location. For that reason, the local project does in fact have to be more long-lasting, longer than *Untitled*, for example, or my project with the prisoners at Leuven Centraal for *The Making of Justice*.

Do you know of comparable projects?

No, there are not enough. That is the sickness of the entire arts sector. Economic conditions mean that today, you can only work on short-term projects. And there is a high degree of focus on product. I am not saying that every project has to be long-term, but for me, that possibility is indeed a necessary condition for my artistic activity to be connected to my citizenship. For me, they have always been intertwined. Someone once asked me if I was setting out to make *The Making of Justice* primarily as a work of art. The truth is that for me, art has always been a good place to do what I want to do as a citizen.

Does internationalization limit that space, or does it expand it? Are we freer for being able to work more internationally, or indeed more enslaved?

SV: I think it makes us incredibly weaker, because it turns us into a kind of pulled-apart, detached cosmopolitans. Our travelling is not so very different from that of an economic migrant who is forced to travel out of necessity, in our case because of an economic need to be someplace. It makes everything very fleeting and temporary. It detaches us from our own environment, given that it is difficult to maintain friendships and relationships in the places where we live. And that

is also not possible in those other places we travel to. Internationalization does allow for the expansion of relationships, for making friends and sharing a discourse across borders, but at the same time, it conceals a great danger for the political dimension of art and of being an artist.

Can you identify that danger?

The danger lies in the increasing pressure on the kind of work that can be produced. There is a limit to what can travel, who can travel, how work can be made so that it can be repeated, in short, a number of conditions that have to be satisfied in order to function within that framework.

Does working long-term and locally offer resistance to that? That also requires the right conditions.

Absolutely, and that is also the difficulty. Let me give an example of a project that I am planning, about non-dominant history and non-dominant knowledge in the broadest sense of the terms, for example, stories about Belgium's colonial past, today's unrest in the Rif in Morocco or the history of feminism. They do not have to be political. They can be about any specific handing down of knowledge or ability, even very personal forms. These forms of knowledge are not officially shared by the community as a whole, but in a city like Brussels, they are present everywhere, in the experiences of people and of organizations. If you want to create an accessible place in public space, where people can share that knowledge and history with one another, you need to have a strategy that encompasses years in order to ensure that that place is supported by a broad group of people. Otherwise, it still remains a project that just serves the temporary interests of the artist, when in fact, what it is really about is that with that knowledge as a tool, people can make new friends, with people who are not part of their own original communities already.

Why might that not be possible?

It is very difficult to fit this into the current system of subsidies for the arts. It is sometimes possible to do it outside of that system, but organizations are then rarely supported by any funding for the arts. Subsidized art institutes are under pressure and are being judged by the numbers of people in their audiences. They are indeed encouraged to increase audiences and participation, but that is in turn being twisted by the short-term, routine agenda of the subsidized art institute, so that the result is unfortunately often just a pro forma event.

So, in addition to a local and long-term kind of working , partaking in the public sphere with your project is also an important condition in order to find an alternative for the standardized, international arts circuit?

I find the zone of 'the public sphere' a very difficult one. I do not know what we understand that to mean. It is perhaps more accurate to say 'the civil space', or the space of the 'commons'. In the past, I never worked in public space, by the way I worked in a prison, in people's homes, and I have also pushed myself into all kinds of meetings, but they were always places where there is community. So perhaps it is for me more about bringing a common public sphere into private environments, because that way, they suddenly become potential political places.

How does that work? Because the private soliloquy is then undermined by the public plurality?

Yes, and for that particular reason, art is also important for me. Art brings in a third element that makes another kind of speaking possible. That was very clear in *Untitled*. You went into a house where the inhabitants presented you the objects that they considered art, including for instance a painting of their grandma or other belongings that you probably wouldn't consider art. Your discourse consequently breaks into that of the residents and vice versa, so that an antagonistic space is created. Precisely that is possible because of the element of art. Or, take *The Making of Justice*: in a similar way, envisioning a fictional film scenario together, as I asked them to do, made another kind of speaking possible for the prisoners.

A space for negotiation is created?

I see it primarily as a transformative space. You never know exactly where it is going to go. You never know what you were going to transform into.

It seems to me that you need a confrontation for that.

Yes, it is always hiding something violent. That does not necessarily have to mean a collision. It can also be soft. But you cannot undergo a transformation without losing something, and that loss is always painful, certainly in the society in which we live. In that sense, I think that my work is also an answer to the general fear of losing one's own identity that is so prevalent in our culture, on the pressure that capitalism has infused into us to hold tight to everything, and the impotence that that entails in being able to accept the constant transformation of everything.

For me, it is much more interesting to work for an extended time at a single location, in an arts centre, or if need be, in a tiny village, than to **be in front of audiences that are supposedly international, but are in fact interchangeable.**

I think internationalisation makes us incredibly weaker, because it turns us into a kind of **pulled-apart, detached cosmopolitans**. Our travelling is not so very different from that of an economic migrant who is forced to travel out of necessity, in our case because of an economic need to be someplace. It makes everything very fleeting and temporary. It detaches us from our own environment, given that it is difficult to maintain friendships and relationships in the places where we live. And that is also not possible in those other places we travel to. Internationalization does allow for the expansion of relationships, for making friends and sharing a discourse across borders, but at the same time, it conceals a great danger for the political dimension of art and of being an artist.



The group where the loss of community is really an issue, is that of the artists themselves, because they do indeed embody the role model of being detached from everything. In other words, what they are talking about is themselves. And that is something I really can no longer listen to – that kind of artist talk. Every time I hear it, I think, that's just about you, not about society. When an artist takes off for somewhere in order to do a project about building community, I sometimes find it **really embarrassing** for that reason.



I moreover cannot live in polished cities that are swarming with tourists. It is the very opposite of Brussels, which at least remains obstinate because it is so badly organized. The irony was in fact that in Flanders, people were interested because I was living in the Netherlands. As if working abroad enhanced my prestige. That is no doubt typical for a small region: looking to other countries for acceptance.

In *Turning Turning*, you yourself embraced that principle. Are you never afraid of losing yourself?

Turning Turning was about breaking open the monologue in ourselves. The language lands nowhere. There is no single statement that stays standing. It always stays in constant change. That seems frightening, but because of it, it is precisely change that remains constant, a continuum in the search. Fearful, you ask yourself where the language is taking you, but getting into it has a liberating effect. Ironically enough, *Turning Turning* was in fact a difficult performance to tour with. The curators or programmers never knew what they were going to get. The result was always different. People apparently find that frightening. But that is because they look at it as a product that successfully needs to fulfil pre-established expectations.

How do you resolve that problem?

I have been very fortunate in being able to count on support from CAMPO, the arts centre in Ghent and I guess the only institute in Belgium that follows through on projects by varying artists, from beginning to end, from research and production to and including presentation and distribution. For example, they helped me with an interesting intervention in order to make *Lecture For Everyone* suitable to tour with. The deal is that I hold a public meeting in which I tell about the project, if the location with which we are negotiating can itself arrange five closed meetings. The result is that only those institutes or centres that go along with it are themselves already politically convinced. If all they wanted had been to get people into their seating galleries, they would of course not do it. In fact, the most difficult point is that I also ask them to find as diverse an audience as possible for the meetings, from a doctors' meeting in a hospital, to a choir re-

hearsal, a practice by the local football club to and including a Cercle Gaulois board meeting. To stress an obvious point, all that is not what they normally do: they are simply there to programme performances. So they immediately have to work in a different way. They have to appeal to their personal networks, because it is always by word-of-mouth. You are never going to convince IBM to host a performance unless you know someone in the company. The result is that an art institute has to appeal to its entire staff, and professionalism suddenly also entails getting private identity involved. That is an enormous job, also psychologically, and it produces huge discussions. But that is precisely why I love the project. It does not fit the usual logic. It forces an institute to think differently. CAMPO thinks along with me, for example by providing a detailed rider that clarifies everything to the hosting institutions.

Do you also benefit from the international network that CAMPO has established?

Absolutely. Popular rumour has it that my work is sometimes difficult, at least in terms of selling, so CAMPO plays a key role in distributing it. I do not know how I would do it otherwise, and still be able to show the work as much as I do. But it is not only about the international network with which a centre can offer artists chances to perform and grow. It is also about long-term support for those artists. Does the arts centre allow you to realize diverse projects in collaboration with it, for example? Or only one? Does it offer you the opportunity to return to a given place? That is also important. There are not many places where I appear just once. The public gets to know you and is interested in what you're going to do next. That is very valuable. A dialogue evolves. In that respect, I have built up a really close relationship with the *Kunstenfestivaldesarts* and its audiences, for example.

Do subsidies sometimes play a role in your creating and maintaining that kind of dialogue? Some of those dialogues are transnational, while the funding is national.

I got to know many of the houses and festivals that I have built up connections with through European collaborations. The problem is now that that support is being cut back, because Europe wants to focus on artistic applications and creative industries. That will certainly be felt in reductions in European networks with partners that no longer have the means to program internationally. That is certainly going to be a big problem. In particular, I think it will impact countries on the periphery. For programmers who work from there, travel is not as easy as it is for colleagues at the centre of Europe, while those moments and contacts traditionally serve to reconnoitre what is happening elsewhere, not so much to know what is being shown, but primarily to feel what is really motivating it all.

Doesn't the changing direction in Europe also seem a contradiction in terms of the increasing pressure for artists to work more internationally, the rather coercive push not to remain local?

Yes, but it does fit perfectly into the new provincialism and nationalism. A question I regularly heard when I was working in the Netherlands was: "*Why does your work always have to be in English?*" I was working with the Frascati theatre at the time, but I really wanted to get out of Amsterdam after a while I found the political and artistic climate there horrible at the time. It was just before Geert Wilders was gaining power and Halbe Zijlstra clipped the wings off the entire cultural landscape. I moreover cannot live in polished cities that are swarming with tourists. It is the very opposite of Brussels, which at least remains obstinate because

it is so badly organized. The irony was in fact that in Flanders, people were interested because I was living in the Netherlands. As if working abroad enhanced my prestige. That is no doubt typical for a small region: looking to other countries for acceptance.

Isn't it also typical of Flemish artists to consider Flanders too small or too poor?

That is in any case not true for me. I do not look down on Flanders. I was, for example, delighted that De Spil in Roeselare, or CC Evergem, wanted to take part with *Lecture for Every One*. But that is for the same reason that I am happy to perform in Berlin or Paris: it produces a different audience. Apart from that, however, it strikes me as logical to look for partners in dialogue where they actually happen to be. If your world happens to be mostly outside Flanders, as is the case for me, in the world of performance, you simply have to look outside Flanders to find like-minded artists who can feed your practice.

Does the press help to find them? Does it give enough indication of what is happening elsewhere?

It is very painful for me that the standards of the Flemish mainstream press have deteriorated enormously. You could say that Flanders is too small a cultural area, and that for that reason there is probably too little critical mass to digest what is happening abroad, but it is also a question of freeing up the means to make it happen. Friends who write professionally about art tell me that they can simply no longer make a living from it. They can no longer pay for it. And they are no longer being given a place. The kind of profound critical reflection that you find in France or Germany practically does not exist here. That is a real shortcoming. The problem is of course much broader than just art criticism. There is not enough attention in the Flemish press to what

I am convinced that **artists have fobbed off their pioneering, leadership role into what I would call negative internationalization.** You are presumed to be exceedingly flexible, preferably young, always ready to travel, with no family and not too many commitments.

In short, you must cultivate the illusion that you can cut all your connections, that at any moment you can cut yourself off and become a totally cut-out figurine. It is being sold and promoted as an attitude of boundless freedom, but what is really behind it is an ideologically-motivated demand for extreme flexibility, which makes your existence vulnerable and precarious.

You cannot turn back globalization, the way xenophobes would have us believe, but **we can find a positive answer to globalization gone mad and the excessive circulation of goods, of which we are supposed to be constant consumers,** without even being able to get a proper hold on anything. How do we resist that, we as artists as well?

is going on in the world in general. It has all become so provincial and focused on itself, on its own culture. That is the best way to see that nationalistic tendencies are really having a heyday.

Some voices claim that the nationalist upturn is equally a reaction to the cultural detachment that globalization and internationalization demands of artists, something that you also find problematic.

I am convinced that artists have fobbed off their pioneering, leadership role into what I would call negative internationalization. You are presumed to be exceedingly flexible, preferably young, always ready to travel, with no family and not too many commitments. In short, you must cultivate the illusion that you can cut all your connections, that at any moment you can cut yourself off and become a totally cut-out figurine. It is being sold and promoted as an attitude of boundless freedom, but what is really behind it is an ideologically-motivated demand for extreme flexibility, which makes your existence vulnerable and precarious.

Do artists have to address that precariousness? It indeed applies to the entire society.

To a degree, yes, and *Oblivion* was also about the illusion that you are always stripped of all bonds. But what disturbs me at the same time is that as a reaction to this so-called unattached existence of the artist, there is now an inundation of artistic programs concerning the loss of community or collectivity. In the context of *Lecture for Every One*, it humbled me to see how many people are engaging themselves in coming together, every week, for example, for a rehearsal of the brass band, and so on. The group where the loss of community is really an issue, is in short that of the artists themselves, because they do indeed embody the role model of being detached from everything. In other

words, what they are talking about is themselves. And that is something I really can no longer listen to – that kind of artist talk. Every time I hear it, I think, that's just about you, not about society. When an artist takes off for somewhere in order to do a project about building community, I sometimes find it really embarrassing for that reason.

What might an appropriate engagement be? You also want to work with people more locally.

Capitalism wants engagement strictly focused on yourself. If your engagement consequently just concerns yourself as an artist, establishing yourself or cultivating your own role, it contributes nothing. If your engagement is directed towards the other, or towards the broader community, the situation changes. In that sense, in fact, I do see a shift, not only amongst artists themselves, but also in the art houses and institutes. You cannot turn back globalization, the way xenophobes would have us believe, but we can find a positive answer to globalization gone mad and the excessive circulation of goods, of which we are supposed to be constant consumers, without even being able to get a proper hold on anything. How do we resist that, we as artists as well? How do we find the balance that we seek? The fact that there are so many grassroots civilian movements arising today makes me hopeful in that sense. It indicates that people are again taking things into their own hands.

How can you translate that to artists and venues?

I strongly believe in the powers and the new centres of gravity that are emerging within the field itself. In such artist-run organizations as Auguste Orts, Spin, Jubilee or our own Manyone, the artists take charge of organizing their own practice, based on solidarity and mutuality. It's just that they are not appreciated enough, including financially. In that sense, I do think the art field is saddled with a structural problem in the importance that is still being attributed to institutes based on big names with no follow-up. It seems as though one cannot break away from the model of the institute with a big building based around a single person. That is light years removed from the way artists of my generation, or younger, want to work.

Do you mean to say that your different way of working also requires a political turnaround?

Absolutely. Our kind of artist-run organisations obviously still have to learn more, and become more clever, not least in business terms. But there are solutions for an art field that is organized differently. They are already taking shape. It's just that the existing wealth is not being sufficiently utilized. More fundamental support is needed. It is ultimately the field itself that has to determine which forms of organization should be possible. I would like the art organizations to make the authorities work differently, instead of the other way around. But this is very difficult with the current ideological agenda that is now in force.

Aren't you making a plea for yourself?

No way! And just to be clear, I am not against the existing institutes. There is a lot of know-how out there, and I have a lot to thank it for. Yet I do believe that, with all the good people who work in those institutes, we have to fight against the conservative way in which the existing institutes currently function.

Can you give an example of the right direction? And how do we, as the field of the arts, get there?

I think, above all, that openness to transformation also applies to us, however scary that might seem. Subsidized arts depend almost entirely on white privilege, or more precisely, on white, male, middle-class privilege. Let us open up our houses for other art forms, art forms that are not the dominant ones. That will change our criteria for what is considered art, but also bring along a different audience, or a different notion of what an audience or a public actually is. In that sense, in the arts, we are not exactly pioneers in the way we are acting. If you see how many sectors of society that diversity has already penetrated, including the business world, then the arts are disappointing. Everybody knows that, but there is still always a tendency to hold on to the privileged position. And I am not just talking about the artists, or about the art forms themselves, but also explicitly about management within the institutes, both commercially and artistically. Within those organizations and among their managers, you also have to make more space for gender and colour diversity amongst the people who make the decisions. *'If you're not at the table, you're on the menu.'*

Where does the tendency to hang on to that privilege come from? What are the restraining factors?

First, many venues and artists fear they will pull the carpet right out from under themselves and 'lose their place'. Instead, what I think is: Let's just do it and see what happens. Secondly, and this is perhaps even more important, a programme must always be moving on, looking farther forward. There is no pause button. In fact, everything is possible, but there is not enough time to reinvent the necessary structures, certainly when you know that such a reinvention inevitably goes hand-in-hand with destruction, conflict and confrontation. Finally, in Flanders, there is a large, silent conformity with the white patriarchy, which in Scandinavia, for example, would be unthinkable today. That complicity is structural. It sits deep in our genes. A major change in mentality is consequently required. It would be good if the cultural sector took a pioneering role in achieving it.

So the current tendency to keep things as they are is an issue of the structures and how they work?

In part, certainly. But it is also about the receptivity that exists within those structures to what people do not know. It is not such a big challenge to invite artists from Sweden, or Portugal, or Brazil, when they all come out of the same middle class as those who already populate the art world here. That is certainly an enrichment in terms of nationality, and it does extend beyond geographical borders, but there are sociological borders that weigh in much more heavily than geographical borders, and it is therefore much more worth the effort to transcend these. Then we are talking about giving attention to the non-dominant culture and knowledge of the Brazilian who lives right here around the corner, for instance. Or, to give an example from my own practice, the openness

to the language and the power of imagination on the parts of detainees. Many who have seen my film are amazed that those people speak so inspiringly.

If you want to reach a more diverse public, is it primarily about who you let speak?

It is about which voices you reinforce and strengthen, which language you give a presence to. I think many institutes and art centres today are very compulsive and relentless in their attempts to reach a different audience, other than the traditional Flemish middle classes. But you will never get that other public in your audience if you do not change your own attitude, and do not change what they can see on your stage, and who decides that. If all you want is for a different audience to come in, in order to listen to your language, it won't work. Professionalizing your marketing staff will not be much help either. First, you have to change who makes the decisions and what you present to the outside world, among other things by paying attention to the context in which it is embedded. What you show has to be more diverse, before the audience becomes diverse. The one follows from the other. Otherwise, it all remains a kind of hopeless deed. So what you really need in order to cross that bridge are translators. What you need is a shift to a different language.