

'Nur wer sein Leben und seine Person mit in das Wagnis der Öffentlichkeit nimmt, kann sie erreichen.' Hannah Arendt, 1958

No connection without contamination

Marijke Hoogenboom and Wouter Hillaert in conversation with Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dominique Willaert¹

No mantra is chanted as loudly these days as 'make connections'. The appeal for broad cooperation and new alliances is heard repeatedly from on low and on high – and preferably for connections outside one's own area of specialization. But how then is this supposed to happen in a subsidy system that is still heavily invested in the notion of distinctive individualism and artistic autonomy? Artist Jeanne van Heeswijk and artistic director Dominique Willaert are experts on the matter. "Interaction" is a better word than "connection".

Weren't artists once applauded for radically doing their own thing, of gazing inwards and focusing exclusively on their inner motivations? Their selfishness was seen as their gift to the world, and their contrarian character their strength. Those glory days of individuality are, it seems, gone forever. The worldwide web's network principle has become the basis of our entire society. Everything has to embed itself, connect, and cross-pollinate. 'Together we stand' is the new axiom. But are we actually following our own principles? In our own lives and in the cultural sector, we seem incapable of finding ways to truly cooperate and work together, or of agreeing on ways for doing so. Even our policies remain compartmentalised. Are we as skilled in connecting, as we would like to believe? And does connecting really make us stronger in a climate where the autonomy – particularly the financial autonomy – of 'softer' sectors and initiatives is being hastened on all fronts?

Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dominique Willaert have both been working with a variety of local communities for almost twenty years, and they are fully engaged in giving meaning to public space. Van Heeswijk is a visual artist from Rotterdam, where she has worked on new cooperative forms of self- organization with residents and business owners in the Afrikaander district of her hometown. Willaert is the longstanding visionary behind Victoria Deluxe, the social art workspace in Ghent, Belgium. Here, the vulnerable participants use the creative tools offered by drama, photography, dance and audiovisual media to challenge stereotypes about minority groups and underreported subjects such as psychiatry and the prison system. Van Heeswijk and Willaert never work without partners or other parties. Cooperating with others through the arts is what they do.

How do they define the term 'connection' on the basis of their own practice? Is it still of any use as a heartfelt aspiration? Or does the idea need to be critically reviewed? Willaert gets to the point right away: "Connection" is a misleading term,' she says. 'The pitfall of connection is that you easily slip into a sort of "unintended pacification", with rough edges being smoothed off for

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the sake of friction-free cooperation, and differences being covered up instead of held up as being of extra value. All too often “connection” becomes “pacification”. And then it functions merely as a sop.’

What should ‘connection’ be, then, a sop or a security blanket?

Willaert: ‘You can’t get around the fact that the development of our identity is strongly influenced by neoliberalism or, to put it less bluntly, by the dominant economic system. People are trained to sell themselves, not to connect with a structured world. Yet you find that people who are put under pressure by that system react with real resilience. In southern Europe the crisis destroyed the prospects of an entire generation, but at the same time gave rise to new local community centres. These new organisations give space for interaction between the four crucial areas of economics, ecology, arts and politics. To me, “Interaction”, feels like a better term than “connection”. Interaction doesn’t always have to be positive; it can also rub people the wrong way. When we interact with lots of different actors in a variety of disciplines at Victoria Deluxe, the clashes and conflicts can produce very interesting results.’

Van Heeswijk: ‘My thoughts about connection run along similar lines. I don’t believe in the traditional way of connecting, either. I see the public domain as a political space, as a field of tension in which we must have the courage to question and discuss our own ideas and values. This is what the American sociologist Grant Kester identifies as the “messiness” in all connective or cooperative processes. In other words: “cross-contamination”. He observes that these days, social engagement is seen as diametrically opposed to autonomy, as if interaction might somehow lead to impure art. Kester argues that cross-contamination is the only option available today. Especially, in the now constant field of tension between attachment and autonomy, which includes preventing individual claims of ownership in this field of tension.’

How does this idea of contamination manifest itself in your own practice?

Van Heeswijk: ‘I talk about the “field of interaction” a kind of action-and-reaction where you’re open to the possibility of contamination from one another. Creating a situation like this is quite a radical step. You need to have the courage to let go of your assumptions, to risk your own subjectivity. How do you train yourself to do this? How do you embrace contamination? These to me are key questions. In our day and age it’s all about security, false security. Take for instance the notion of ‘making an impact’, the guiding principle of The Art of Impact, the new temporary subsidy scheme in the Netherlands. At its core it stipulates that you must be successful, whereas we really ought to be questioning our very idea of success. We need to learn a whole new way of being in the world, of being vulnerable but also strong, of being political but also connected. One of the hardest things to do today is to dare to be both autonomous and communal. But that's precisely what I'm trying to achieve in my durational practices with my long-term commitments. They are exercises in daring to let go: repeated interventions for training yourself to unlearn things. This requires a degree of trust, so you’re not just taken apart but also protected. The way I see it that duality – the confrontation between breaking and protecting is political.’

Willaert: ‘Actually, we’ve still got the wrong idea about who’s best equipped for that exercise in unlearning. Is it us? In our projects at Victoria Deluxe we notice that it is often those without official documents, people with nothing, who inspire other citizens. These are people with

plenty of fundamental trust and therefore lots of resilience – they need to keep themselves going, even though they're not considered to be full citizens. They may not have rights, but as individuals they often have the skills – economic or social – to continue to make connections. Cultural institutions, on the other hand, have got fear built into their DNA. Their search for connections is opportunistic, and driven less by necessity. At Victoria Deluxe we prefer to build partnerships with schools, universities, prisons and the forensic institute out of curiosity, out of desire to learn from another. We look for qualities other than success. But are our policymakers really interested in this approach? They want you to primarily emphasize your organisation's artistic merits. We've proposed a discussion of this subsidy system with our network of connections.'

How do you explain the current ubiquitous call for connections, including from the political world? What's the hidden motive?

Van Heeswijk: 'One of the main characteristics of this era is the super-differentiation and fragmentation of society. People no longer feel involved in the place they live. They no longer have any idea of how that place is being shaped – of who decides what, who formulates policies and regulations, who pays for it, or how it's discussed. And where do we fit in the process of perception? So people isolate themselves in small communities. It's a very human response, and very understandable, but what if this fragmentation leads to a serious level of disconnection? Then politicians and all sorts of organisations involved in society start appealing for connections. But who benefits from this? What is the point of these connections? Are we doing it to make the current status quo more flexible and comfortable? Or are we trying to redefine our relationship to place to give us more say in its creation? This is the big issue in socially engaged art right now.'

How do you avoid being enlisted in an agenda that merely confirms the status quo?

Van Heeswijk: 'When I'm working within a field of interaction it's important to formulate a set of questions for the field itself, to make it possible to critically examine what we do. And then you can take a look at what the field yields through the actions and reactions. I call this process "radicalization". I'm using both meanings of the word here, of allowing things to emerge and be explosive while at the same time forming new connections. You could describe it as re-rooting in two stages. You reveal something and allow it to sprout roots again. This requires more than creating a participatory society only through self-built houses, allotments and banlieue theatre award juries. That kind of thing is often too focused on one theme or one type of activity, and on reaching target outcomes and target groups. Rather, we need to consider creating "urban unions"; complex connections on the scale of entire districts of the city, incorporating everything that takes place there. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* David Harvey says that the desire to shape the world is not an individual undertaking but has to be a collective one. To be able to reshape our immediate environment in relation to others is a fundamental right. We are currently denied this right on a massive scale.'

Willaert: 'It is crucial that this comes from below. Look at all the exciting revolutionary movements of recent years, in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Istanbul's Taksim Square, the Puerta del Sol in Madrid and at Occupy Wall Street in New York. These places were typically populated by a mix of communities, a huge diversity of people, and in some cases, virtual communities even evolved into physical manifestations of resistance. One of the great things about this was that

these movements weren't predicted. No one could control the opposition; it was not orchestrated from above. And yet you can read this as a form of "re-rooting", and new movements have emerged from all those previous individual communities.'

What does that say about the times in which we live?

Van Heeswijk: 'The Turkish artist Zeyno Pekünlü said in an interview about her experience in Taksim Square: 'It was not planned, but that does not mean that we were not prepared.' In the lead up to that time, there were already lots of small-scale activities through which people tried repeatedly to gain control of their environment. All those small moments proved to be a form of learning, practice runs for a possible change that everyone felt but couldn't yet identify. I'd like to turn this finding into a question: How do we train ourselves in our daily actions for a future change without the knowledge of what that change would look like, *and without having to set targets to work towards with a sense of purpose?* I see our practice as a continuous field of learning in which one practices in conjunction with others. It's essential to realise that it's more about training than participating. What you learn together, you also need to put to the test. So how do you practice connecting? How do you practice openness and preparedness for cross-contamination?'

Willaert: 'It's only possible by coming together in specific places with all these different groups, doing your own thing and learning from one another almost by a process of mimesis. When you link up all the different desires, they generate a powerful argument for the commons, a renewed faith in the importance of public goods and services, and of the sharing of knowledge. This is what the economic journalist Paul Mason means when he writes about how a shared desire for a different world comes into being in places of public resistance. Individual desires remain but they are now linked to those of others. And together they can lead to a new type of human and society, one that can replace the old.'

How do you work as an artist with this outcome-free strategy? Does it mean taking on a different role?

Van Heeswijk: 'Personally, as an artist, I prioritize those questions that are necessary to form a field of interaction, but once the field comes to life I drop that role of being the driving force and become a co-actor and co-reactor. It's something that's pretty difficult even for individuals to comprehend, let alone institutions. I can't answer questions about what happens after this stage; you need to look for answers within the field itself. So I see my role more as a facilitator than as a director. I don't determine the outcome.'

Willaert: 'Yes, the older I get the less control I want to have on the process. You're creating something, but you've got no idea how it's going to turn out. This makes it impossible to predict the outcome on a funding application. Assessment committees and policy-makers want you guarantee that you're going to implement a specific concept, but what I do is outline a given context and set some basic arrangements. This approach by funding bodies to maintaining discipline ignores the fundamental shifts now taking place, spanning multiple sectors and not fitting neatly into established frameworks. The whole notion of sector-specific funding is ripe for re-examination.'

But isn't it still reasonable to outline some preconditions for assessing the quality of the connections? If we don't, how will we distinguish between meaningful and less meaningful

interactions?

Van Heeswijk: 'For me the most important condition is "criticality". You need to be free to put your current assumptions of the discussion. This is something that's becomes almost impossible to do in most government-funded programmes. I see so many projects that simply confirm the status quo and follow the same rules: to address a particular problem they select people from a group that normally isn't actively involved in the culture sector – be they loitering youths, lonely pensioners or farmers – and that they match with a group of artists, and this leads to a project that's supposed to provide a solution. It is of course a good thing in itself that there is additional funding for arts and culture, but it's hard to ignore the fact that this approach is driven on all fronts by the idea that culture is a tool, and it is predicated on an educative agenda. We are essentially carrying out the wishes of the policymakers. So socio-artistic work has become an important source of income for lots of people and there are more and more courses for artists who want to be socially engaged. All of a sudden there are opportunities to learn how to set up a social art project, monitor your income and calculate your hours. It means you're budgeting for the process of thinking about connections and the public and as if it were a commercial production. I see this as the commodification of society, where everything becomes a production for mass entertainment. You can't budget a community in the making, can you? The most you can do is budget for bits and pieces. I don't see my work as a series of commercial productions. I see my work as wanting to be involved in society, as a will to act. It's an attitude.'

Willaert: 'The way I see it there are two fundamentally different models. There's the disciplinarian model, popular not only with supporters of neoliberalism but also supported by Western social democratic forces. We still cherish the illusion that we can develop models into which everyone fits. The other model, which Jeanne has also been talking about, is the one that develops organically, something that we in Western Europe find very hard to accept. This way of working and living is a given in other communities and on other continents. Policymakers who hope for participation and emancipation in society need to consciously hand over some of their power to the people and the local communities.'

But hasn't the increased attention that governments pay to participation made a lot of things possible?

Willaert: 'We've all been duped by semantics. Noam Chomsky and John Blommaert put it well: the left's idea of participation has been hijacked by the liberal right's idea of participation. It's misleading the young generation. What's going on now has got nothing to do with participation. The term is misused to divest government of its responsibilities. All this economising is unnecessary, whether it's happening in the Netherlands or Belgium. The state still finances itself by taxing its citizens, so we should also have a say in how the funds are distributed. That's why I'm against all these alternative methods of financing, such as crowd-funding. We've been much too quick to accept these alternatives. We haven't had the courage as a sector to say, 'No! No cutting of subsidies, and no alternative funding!' These cuts that have been imposed are the perfect example of how neoliberals have made a laughing stock of their citizens.'

Van Heeswijk: 'The freedom to participate is of course very important, but to participate in what? If there's no room to critically question the way things work, then participation is merely another way of doing fun stuff. When you talk about making new connections, you're also talking about critical reflection, about democracy, about new forms of self-organization – which

could include anti-capitalist strategies. You can't separate one from the other. You touched on the idea that the left's conceptual framework has been hijacked, and it's precisely because of this that I think it's really important to keep ensuring that there are possibilities for new forms of society to develop, and for the redistribution of wealth and power to take place.'

Do you already see evidence of this new critical form of society?

Van Heeswijk: 'Yes, but at some distance from governments. Right now I'm conducting research in Philadelphia into what I call "atmospheres of democracy". These are fledgling movements that aren't fully organized, that are working out of living rooms and community centres, and trying to cultivate resilience and generate resistance to specific problems. A good example is the New Sanctuary Movement, which uses the old religious idea of the church as a refuge offering protection to migrant workers threatened with deportation. And there's also Opt-Out, a group of parents and teachers who oppose the mandatory test system in American schools that results in more than half of the children, especially African-American children, never entering higher education. This is an example of how alliances are formed by people who wouldn't normally come into contact with one another, finding each other now because of a shared resilience. I have come across more than a hundred examples of this sort of connection of private responses to public situations, of efforts to generate resistance to concrete problems. These are exciting new developments.'

What implications do all these dynamics of connectivity have for the old ideal of artistic autonomy? Is it a temporary phenomenon in which artists take a social position and contribute to the occupation of the Maagdenhuis at Amsterdam University or support the refugee movement We Are Here?

Van Heeswijk: 'I think there's definitely a paradigm shift underway. Autonomy is still important, but I think of it more as *relational* autonomy. In one of Hannah Arendt's last lectures, in praise of Karl Jaspers in 1958, she said, 'It's only those who dare to risk their life and person in public that can change society.' That's a beautiful and complex thought. She was talking about humanity. Autonomy, your subject-position, is not "disconnected from" but "related to". If we dare to put into question this autonomy in relation to our place and times and dare to reconnect again I think we'll might be getting somewhere. I see more and more people using their skills, knowledge and abilities in commitment to a larger whole. They are daring to put themselves at the service of defragmentation.'

Willaert: 'I definitely want to continue to defend autonomy, but at the same time I want to keep it in perspective. Some social transformations will simply come along anyway; they'll just happen to us. There was a time when we could seclude ourselves in contemplation, but we're being overwhelmed by stimuli nowadays. As a result, we're acquiring lots more skills to help us cope with the super-diversity of society. There are as many pitfalls as opportunities in this new "network society", but you have to admit that these are exciting times. The shifts you see in the art world are happening in other fields, too.'

The major cultural institutions want to be more in touch with what's happening around them, too. What advice would you give these established structures?

Willaert: 'A critical mood towards the status quo arises naturally only once you've ceded power.'

I mean “power” in the positive sense: the power to develop something. Redistributing this power would require all the major institutions to stop producing for a year, and put on half as many shows as they currently do. We need to produce at a much slower pace, with more traditional methods. Like Richard Sennett, I long for a culture in which you can react physically by working with your hands and feet and express yourself in the public sphere. How can it be that so many people in our field are ill and have physical complaints of one kind or another?’

Van Heeswijk: ‘It remains a profession that involves passion, a practice in which you must dare to doubt and dare to take things apart. You need to be open to being uncertain. There’s no need for everything to fit exactly, or to be measurable and translatable. That’s why I have difficulty with the debate about the precarious working conditions in the arts. If it becomes solely productivist you fall into the same trap. I’d hate to compromise the intensity of my work. In that sense I see the old institutions as dead men walking, so what advice can I possibly give them? That they should have been open to change much earlier? I think it’s great that they’re searching around for ideas, and of course I’m willing to engage them in dialogue or act as a collaborating partner, but I don’t feel it’s my duty to bring them up to speed. Why are they searching? Is it because their position – which they never felt the need to discuss before – is starting to falter? Instead of wasting my energy on old institutions, I prefer to work with the new forms that are springing up everywhere. There’s enough to do in this world.’

Willaert: ‘Yes, it sounds like a trick question. It’s difficult to give advice from the periphery. If your decision to change is driven by self-preservation, then there’s nothing we can do. The question these big institutions really need to be asking is “What have we forgotten?” Out of all the flashpoints I’ve been to, there wasn’t one where the major institutions were playing a significant role.’

Van Heeswijk: ‘I also don’t think change works like that, and that’s the great thing about that Zeyno Pekünlü quote. We’re all practicing on a small scale, and at the moment sorted itself an opportunity presents itself for us to join in – in whatever cause – we can generate a critical mass. Perhaps then we will not only be in a position to offer advice, but also to propose something. The major institutions themselves must devote time to thinking about how they want to create change. Our work isn’t some random project. It’s a shared attitude.’

Do you share a specific idea of a future utopia with respect to making connections?

Van Heeswijk: ‘When I think about the future it’s with a pragmatic view of a ‘concrete’ utopia in the situation right here, in the life in this city, in this field of tension. We need to figure this out together and change it together. It’s an exercise that’s urgently needed. That’s why I always start off from the local – it perfectly embodies global conflicts. The key question is this: How to live together in the right here and the right now? That’s not some distant projection but a daily lived reality.’

Willaert: ‘Yes, the future is already present in these phenomena. The many people developing alternatives and new practices today all have something visionary about them. They prefigure the dream that many people have of a more just world.’

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