

At the opening ceremony of the Theatre Festival 2015 in Belgium, Barbara Van Lindt, managing director of DasArts, delivered the traditional State of the Union. This speech for and about the performing arts world marks the start of a new season.

State of the Union

Good evening,

Thank you, Charlotte, Kristof, Michiel, Sébastien ... the new editorial staff of *Etcetera*. A prelude like that by the younger generation, a State of the Youth like that, means of course that the State of the Union is grown up – or not. I myself am about to face my 50th birthday. How am I going to turn that round number, that uninvited marker in my life, into something significant? What am I going to devote myself to, what will I ultimately leave behind? And how do I want to celebrate it?

In her book *Why Grow Up?*, the philosopher Susan Neiman notes that people in our society do not have much of an inclination to become adults. Getting older is a nightmare. We consider childhood and youth the best years of our lives, but as we grow up, one injustice after the other makes deep inroads in our faith in the world. People, things and events do not live up to their promises. When the disappointment has to do with the breaking of a moral commitment, it especially arouses our anger.

The gap between what the world is and what it ought to be is irrevocable, and as we grow older, we see this borne out repeatedly. In reality, people often betray or pretend to adhere to our society's norms and values. You become disappointed and disappoint yourself as well.

For Neiman, philosophy always has a normative aspect and she doesn't shy away from making resolute statements. For instance, she sees the unremitting urge to unmask injustice, to continually denounce unmet promises, as adolescent behaviour. Especially when the parties doing the unmasking are carried away by their own cleverness. Exhausting, and it doesn't help.

We can also protect ourselves from further disappointments by simply readjusting our expectations. From now on, we resolve to distrust sincerity of any kind. Our worldly wisdom is based on the conclusions we have drawn from our bad experiences. This is called scepticism, and it's an impenetrable shield. But does it give any impetus for change?

The most common picture of adulthood is *resignation*. Presented as a natural process that runs synchronously with irreversible signs of aging, there is something fatalistic about it. The air of dullness that surrounds it makes it even more unattractive.

What does have a mobilizing effect, however, is the realization that the present world order is benefited by keeping us infantile and incapable of self-government. So let's get going. There are plenty of reasons to be angry, concerned and impatient.

Drawing upon ideas from the Enlightenment, Neiman sees the development of the ability to judge as the most important condition for growing up. Judging cannot be taught, however; you learn by doing it.

The guidelines she provides come straight from the 18th century, formulated by Immanuel Kant:

1. Think for yourself.
2. Think from everyone else's position.
3. Always think in keeping with yourself.

To do this, you do not need more knowledge than you already have; you need courage, determination and generosity. Maturity arises from a painful sense of reality – but also be aware, says Neiman, that criticizing is not the only form of intelligence. It starts with reconsidering, fundamentally questioning things that go without saying...

I too didn't think, after 100 pages, that this outcome was very spectacular. And yet I find it somewhat useful. It makes me aware again of the attitudes you can assume at any given moment. From which you think and work, and which you take with you into the world. I recognize all of them, in myself and in the people around me. But Susan Neiman's call for maturity puts me on the alert.

I have looked at the Flemish theatre scene through that lens.

The new Arts Decree carries the promise of a surprising shift in the world of the arts. It offers more possibilities for shaping organizations in a way that is suited to artists, their needs and ambitions. The decree invites you to examine and redefine the essence of your activities: What do you *yourself* want? What functions are you willing to commit yourself to? Why? What do you think is important?

More existential than ever. You are being addressed, you could say, as an adult.

Four years ago in the Netherlands, the arts were sent to the corner like a little child, where they practically started hyperventilating from the combination of having to assume self-responsibility and furnish quantitative proof. Subsidy per planned performance. Subsidy according to the number of seats in the hall. Filling up the hall became the overriding criterion and audience attendance figures dominated the framing of the entire landscape of the arts.

Here in Flanders, the concept note for the Arts Decree is full of well-meaning appreciation. For instance, bare audience figures cannot be used as a threatening argument, since audience attendance is not a problem. And even if public opinion is pervaded with populist and conservative ideas, the healthy self-confidence of the Flemish theatre world will allow it to develop and formulate a qualitative vision and ambitions for the future audience and its makeup, their involvement with that audience and manner of communicating. This is a luxury that does not alter the responsibility.

I take it I'm not the only one here today who is participating in the Citizen's Cabinet convened by Minister of Culture Sven Gatz. So our curiosity about unsuspected observations and exchanges has, after all, gotten the best of our sceptical knowledge of what that discussion will probably lead to. It's a little too late for it to play a part in the dossiers – I have the impression that everybody is already counting the signs. And I am keeping an eye on what the minister will do with the outcome.

If we look past the deadline of 1 October, that's when the big judging and allocating starts. Again and again at this point, we see the gap between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be: there's not enough money for everybody. It's a situation that is dished up to us as inevitable, but actually, it's a political, ideological choice. It's a situation that could be different. **How are we going to deal with that?**

The Flemish minister, backed up by committees, isn't afraid of getting his fingers burnt. But Sven Gatz's solo intervention in the allocation of project subsidies is causing the entire sector to be concerned about how the multiyear dossiers are going to be handled.

The protest against it – stirred up by indefatigable pioneers and sharpshooting writers – shows that this sector can be broadly mobilized for a cause that directly affects only a few. When all of us were standing together in the sea, had overcome the shame and the cold water, it turned out to be fairly difficult to keep our heads above water in the waves. But the feeling arose that this shivering, gurgling group of theatre people sloshing up against each other is capable of doing much more. Perhaps the minister will reverse his decisions as a result.

Could we prevent projects and companies from becoming small change in a political dynamic that has nothing to do with content, is not even ideological, but perhaps intent on enabling deals solely based on party politics?

I have wondered whether we need a Flemish Performing Arts Fund. The argument against it is that a fund keeps the discussion too far away from politics, art disappears from the agenda and as a result, public interest in art evaporates. The idea of a fund was bandied about as an option for a while, under the suspect term of *verfondsing* ('fundinization'). Yet it doesn't have to be like it sounds. Here are three arguments in favour of it, inspired by the Dutch funds:

1. A fund implements government policy: it allocates subsidies. It also makes policy itself, based on needs in the field, makes priorities and devises regulations. This intermediary role is where its potential influence on politics lies.

2. As an institution, a fund generates mass, can add its weight to the scale in politics. A fund gains financial headroom 'on behalf of'. And it can also get urgent themes on the agenda 'on behalf of'. In light of the fact that the big institutions are gobbling up an increasingly greater part of the budget, a firm negotiating partner such as this is necessary. A fund is particularly advantageous for the smaller subsidies, not only for projects but also for a growing number of (independent) organizations and autonomous initiatives.

Last year in the Netherlands, for instance, when money became available for talent development, the Dutch Performing Arts Fund collaborated with young makers and their mentors in the field to negotiate with the minister on the how to allocate and spend it. This was playing strategic politics. Yes, this was lobbying – not to evade democratic procedures for a personal interest, but teaming up to enforce policy for a common interest. Exactly the mentality we know from the broadly supported protest here.

3. I see more and more arrangements arising in the Netherlands around combinations of artists and production houses or festivals. What is remarkable is the confidence that these arrangements place in the integrity, artistic choices and professionalism of all parties involved. Artists (especially starting ones) do not immediately have to present fully worked-out production plans to be accepted. And the evaluation procedures are light. To me, this is a mentality of everybody sharing responsibility. Pretty adult.

We're still far from an ideal world, naturally, and there are many things to be said against it, but I don't have time for that now and it's not part of my argument. So.

Because just imagine that we do have a Flemish Performing Arts Fund. With a set budget of its own – and it isn't enough. That could very well happen. If so, we might have to think for ourselves, think from everyone else's position, and think in keeping with ourselves. In order to shake things up, get something going.

An inspiring example comes from another sector, the academic world, where a researcher demonstrated that if all of the men working in Dutch universities earned the same as all of the women with the same function as theirs, no cutbacks would be necessary. Why is this proposal so powerful, why does it cause such a commotion? Because it simultaneously unmask the problem and solves it, is pragmatic and idealistic, courageous and ethical. It works within the existing structures and offers a real alternative. It has not been carried out, but it exists.

Back to our own thought exercise. The financial means are strained, headroom needs to be created.

In the current debates, certain categories are openly targeted: get rid of the dinosaurs, prune the midfield. Let's begin by acknowledging that stopping goes against a human need for security, against the vain pride of many and against the perspective of a dedicated lifelong development. We have not learned how to stop, and we don't get any help when we do. It takes courage.

Instead of rushing ahead to indicate the directors, companies and makers that must be replaced, I would like us to stop and think about a mentality that might be holding us back more.

I call that mentality – and I'm being provocative here – **the deriving of rights from artistry**. The idea that once you are in the system, and if your work is good, or in any case not bad, you have the right to carry on. The idea that you have the right to keep developing. That you have the right to do a great deal and to do everything yourself. You really have to give your

all to get in that system, for only there can you find the proper appreciation for your work. Could it be that the professionalization of the sector is calling this into question?

I read somewhere that we as a group, the people in the art world, are considered privileged by just about everybody on the outside. In their eyes, we are lucky devils, Sunday's children. Even without our having a prospective pension or a decent collective labour agreement, that's what they think. I have the urge to loudly object to that, naturally, but also feel the strength of that re-frameworking. What are the privileges of the artist? Here's a few picks from the hat: the privilege of working based on a shared liking and urgency, until it is done. The privilege of being a parasite or opportunist. The privilege of doing therapy without a diploma, doing politics without a party card...

Thinking in terms of 'rights' encourages dissatisfaction, and that has something juvenile about it. Thinking in terms of 'privileges' raises the question of how you are going to exert them, makes an appeal to generosity. A right is something you want to keep, a gift is something you can share.

We have a choice. Hold onto our artistic autonomy as the be-all and end-all for our work and place within the system or use our artistic capacities to relate to public space, in or out of the theatre. In or out of the system?

In his panoramic essay 'Hoeveel stad verdraagt de kunst?' (How much city will art tolerate?), Erwin Jans sketches the spectrum of art's possible relations to public space, giving four characterizations of publicness in artistic practice: 'Conflict space stands for the possibility of a political discussion space; breathing space stands for the possibility of developing a broad social network of encounters through impetus from an artistic institution; free space stands for the necessity of open-ended experiment; and playing space stands for the possibility of action, creativity and engagement.'

Seen in this way, the artist's potential practice appears as a horizon that stretches further than the system as we know it. This creates space. The concept of 'stage' becomes fluid, traditional roles can be transformed. A director can be a part-time teacher, an actor can be involved in the development of nursing robots, a director can lead discussions in a business undertaking.... Anyone who follows today's art world knows that this is already happening. But it is not always seen as a valuable extension of artistic talent. Only when we too can value these multi-form practices will we be able to consider them for ourselves.

Should there happen to be too little money for all of the plans – I am only using this hypothesis to make my argument more compelling, you understand – will we just concentrate on the choice between stopping or carrying on as usual? Will we keep clamouring that 1% of the Gross National Product has to go to culture? Will we continue to unmask the entire system as being inherently unjust? Those who do so will be absolutely right and should by all means keep doing it. But is this grown up in the way that Neiman has proposed? No. It's not enough.

What's important is having the courage to undertake an intimate and collective self-examination that is aimed at allocating rather than replacing. Daring to ask ourselves the

question: In what way am I contributing? Daring to rethink our claims to a place in the system.

Do we want our professionalized sector to grow up too? In that case, new policy instruments are necessary. The position of artists can be strengthened and developed in a more diverse manner. A system of mandates for all companies and institutes seems like a good idea to me – a mandate actually functions as a kind of project subsidy: you set yourself goals for a limited period. And a lot can still be obtained through supplementary financing. A small observation: Flanders, one of the richest regions in the world, has the highest concentration of art collectors. As far as I know, there are hardly any private funds that give money away instead of investing it. In the Netherlands, where the tax rate is lower but the morale about paying taxes is higher, there are dozens of private funds that finance cultural projects.

But I don't think up policy instruments, I direct a Master's degree programme for theatre makers. Two days ago, at the beginning of the academic year there, I concluded my introductory speech with a quotation from Irit Rogoff, an inspired curator, theorist and teacher at Goldsmiths in London. In the book *Visual Cultures as Seriousness*, she takes the concept of 'seriousness' closer to home – far from the notion of the pompous, the momentous. Not focusing on what is 'important', but with a feeling for what is 'significant'. For me, this is an echo of Neiman's argument for adulthood, except that Rogoff, like us, has the privilege of being part of the big, engaged art world.

And I quote: 'I think that to take things seriously is to act against cynicism.... I find seriousness to be hugely attractive, and something I want to redeem – not as posturing, but as processual work. One of the huge shifts to have come about in contemporary art is that we are no longer viewers of it from the outside, because it no longer comprises bounded objects, or because it is not constituted exclusively by objects.... It's so many things: it's processes, it's spatial practices, it's pedagogical and education initiatives, it's communing and conversing and gathering and protesting, it's researching and mimicking – all of that.... We are inhabitants [of that]. And as such we can't enter it, in a cynical way, with a series of closed, knowing attitudes.'

Barbara Van Lindt

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