



European Dancehouse Network

(Un)Conference: Imaginary Relationships
Report by Theresa Luise Grindlstrasser

(UN)Conference • Day 1

Sustainability is a term we very often use in the context of “sustainable development”. Sustainable development then is very often used in the sense of progress, of becoming better and maybe more, but not too much and most importantly without minimizing the options too much that this planet holds for us in the future. Or as the United Nations coined it in 1987 and Wikipedia is providing it today: “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.“

After the first day of the (UN)Conference **Elke Krasny**, who was giving the first keynote titled *Planetary Perspectives + Politics of Care*, was the one to remind the audience of the fact that the title of the conference relates a strange lot to (UN)Conference, so after one full day of speaking about “sustainability in relation to artistic production” a lot of different attitudes towards this term have, not surprisingly, popped up. In everyday understanding sustainability is something we try to do by buying “Ja! Natürlich” milk, by swapping clothes with friends and by not flying to Canada and Vietnam but choosing one of the two. When it comes to discussing this concept and also its origin and development it all leads very quickly to questioning the whole arrangement we live in, the economic and political structures we are facing and the role of art in the midst of all this.

So yes, as promised in the programme outline, there was very little talk about the specific possibilities of how to establish our everyday understanding of sustainability also in the field of art production and art distribution. Like: How to provide continuity in the work process of artists and create possibilities for them to work longer on a project, to show the project more often, to try and fail, to grow an own repertoire? Or: How to avoid playing the game of searching/finding/promoting young artists only until the next one is searched for, found and promoted? The second day will present more of these so called best practice solutions. But there was lots of talk.

During the three keynotes in the morning – Janek Müller who was supposed to give the very first one of them was not able to attend the conference -, but even more so during the open discussion after lunch at least two notions of “sustainability” were established. The first one I would like to call “slow down”, the second one will be “where the hell”, and yes, this is Radiohead.

“Slow down”. Why? And in what sense? Because capitalism is based on a concept of “the more, the merrier” and only when we interrupt or disrupt this concept we can start breathing again. As we go faster and faster and produce more and more we lose the capacity to look ahead and question what it is we are doing here. So **Adrienne Goehler** in her lecture *How do we actually want to live?* – beautiful slip of the tongue by I forgot who it was: “working nine to five” – was promoting the idea of a basic income grant, not tied to any conditions. Slowing down means redirecting resources in order to provide a chance also for those who are not already merrier. So what I call “slow down” is searching for means to put an end to the constant necessity of running.

“Where the hell”. The second notion of sustainability is actually asking, why the hell we would want to continue living in a system that will, and has always done so, as Elke Krasny was explaining, find profit also in concepts that seemingly try to change it, while only polishing symptoms and never touching the primal scene. This primal scene would be gaining profit. So the second notion captures capitalism as something that feeds solemnly on that. **Jacob Bilabel**, who is giving his keynote tomorrow, was in this context speaking about ideas of a shared economy in contrast to the economy based upon scarcity in which we live today.

(UN)Conference • Day 2

The second day of the (UN) Conference [This naming could by the way be understood as a reference to the tryout of talking situations other than the classic frontal lectures of a conference, as for instance the open discussion yesterday. It could also be understood as a bartlebyan reaction to the overproduction not only in the arts but also in the theoretical sector. As **Alexander Gottfarb** was saying today: “We need to work less”.], this was a really long parenthesis, so: The second day of the (UN) Conference circled around the relation of quantity and quality.

When it comes to the pragmatic problem of having a certain budget and being in the position of deciding who, or whose project to fund from this money, a decision has to be taken every time: Do we want to spend this amount of money we have on as many artists as possible, try to reach out as far as possible and engage in disseminating possibilities for as many people as possible? This decision for quantity over quality could be seen as a stance against the mechanisms of success, of reproducing and repeating of what is already going on. It could be called a somewhat utilitarian approach with a big interest in justice. This will realistically result in very small amounts of money for the single artist or the single project. This will also result in artistic processes that are solely focused on their result and leave no space for the trial/fail/research/development that might be very useful in the creation of a satisfying project for artist and audience likewise. Also this might lead to the overproduction already mentioned above that provides more than the market, in this case the audience, is able or willing to support.

On the other hand we could decide for quality over quantity. This means that the given amount of money we are able to spend would be invested in only very few projects. Allowing the artists involved in this project to spend time and money on actually developing rather than only producing would alleviate the precariousness of their work quite a lot and secure a continuity also in the artistic sector that makes it possible to grow a history and a future to this particular interest [as it was said today: When Pina Bausch developed her vocabulary in the

80s she was given the possibility to do stuff that then nobody was interested in seeing.]. To decide for quality over quantity requires a way more hierarchical system of choosing who is worthy and who is not to be granted a budget. So quality in the sense of “more money for less people” directly leads to different questions of quality. Like: Who is to decide? On what grounds? And, how to tell someone that they should change profession? The last question was posed very frequently today. Do we maybe need to get rid of the last pieces and bits of a genius related idea in arts and get used to the thought, that if we don’t “make it” in so and so many years, we should stop and do something else. And by “making it”, one not necessarily has to think of prestige or money, but one could simply think of an audience, cause these are the ones this stuff is made for, no?

This decision I have now been writing about is not yet one that argues for artistic reasons. It is a fundamentally social and political one. And it is not an easy one. And it is also one that tries to argue for a best possible way of handling things in a system, that as a whole was very much questioned yesterday.

But today: While **Roberto Fratini Serafide** in his keynote titled *Arts of an ending* continued to meditate over certain theoretical aspects of contemporary production, the following three contributions gave insight into actually pragmatic problems as the one mentioned above. **Kerstin Evert** was speaking about the situation of being the artistic director of K3 in Hamburg and having to face financial issues. **Jacob Bilabel** was presenting the Green Music Initiative and gave room for utopian rather than dystopian views on the future. **Eddie Nixon** and **Chris Thomson** tried to give an overview of the audience development that has happened already and is still going on at The Place in London. In the afternoon the open discussion was continued, today tamed by a more fixed frame, and offered lots of anecdotes and stories about different experiences with the relationship of art and sustainability. So this was today, and there is no tomorrow. Not for the conference anyway. But still for us, for the topic and for the planet. [Jacob Bilabel: “We don’t need to change the world, it’s us we need to change.”]

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