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Totally exhausted by the multiple jobs performed to survive? Well, that's not the topic of Samuel Lefevre's "monoLog", shown at the RADIKAL festival in November. It just came to mind ... © Foto: Oleg Degtiarov

essay

Dancing On The Edge

An account in numbers of the Brussels and Berlin contemporary dance artists' precarious working conditions

In her transdisciplinary study "Choreographies of Precariousness", Annelies Van Assche has been researching the working and living conditions in the contemporary dance scenes of Brussels and Berlin since 2014. Self-precarization is a term coming up a lot – one could ask if it's still sexy to be poor, as then Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit put it over a decade ago. For tanzraumberlin, Van Assche has summarized some of her findings as of now. She will continue her research to find out more about how the (poor) living conditions of contemporary dance artists affect the creative process, the aesthetics and subject matter of artistic work.

Annelies Van Assche
Performance Studies Scholar

A glimpse into the field of contemporary dance suggests that most contemporary dance artists are in a precarious professional situation. "Precarious" is understood as a state of uncertainty that originates in political, economic and social aspects of life. The term precariat refers to the growing group of people teetering on the edge of insecurity since the shift to Post-Fordism. Cultural historian Andrea Ellmeier argues that in this work regime "the new creative workforce is meant to be young, multi-skilled, flexible, psychologically resilient, independent, single and unattached to a particular location" (Cultural Entrepreneurialism 2003, 3). Today, Western European societies promote the idea that artists should become entrepreneurial individuals who work anywhere and anytime in exchange for low wages or immaterial income. In fact, this can best be summed up in the words of choreographer Jan Ritsema: "Instead of slaving for somebody else, many more people will become their own slaves. Artists seem to be the explorers, guinea pigs, and teasers for this new economy" (Spike Art Magazine 2015). In Europe, contemporary dance artists are typically job-hoppers working with temporary contracts and performing many hours of unpaid labor. Many dance artists have to manage with project-based and therefore conditional funding and this fosters a precarious position. These statements call for a more empirically informed account of the dance artists' actual working conditions, especially since choreographer and philosopher Petra Sabisch's outline of the evolution of the socio-economic position of dance artists in Germany (and Europe) demonstrates the particularly precarious nature of the profession. She notes that even though this precarious situation has been known about for years, it has worsened catastrophically (in particular in terms of income development and gender equality) (Für eine Topologie der Praktiken 2016, 78). Brussels and Berlin are said to be magnetic poles for international contemporary dance artists; surely, these cities ought to offer more appealing working conditions rather than precarious ones?

A socio-economic survey on Brussels and Berlin

In what follows, I outline the socio-economic position of contemporary dance artists in these two dance capitals based on data stemming from two e-surveys conducted in Brussels and Berlin on the general working conditions in the profession. The reported study is part of a larger academic research on the working and living conditions of contemporary dance artists and how these affect the artistic work itself (see below). The first survey was distributed within the Brussels dance scene in spring 2015 through an extended mailing list. A year later, the second survey was issued by many dance organizations in Berlin with a call for participation. The analysis was done on 94 valid forms in Brussels and 63 in Berlin. Given the research design in both cases, self-selection and self-definition were unavoidable, which means that the presented results have an exploratory character and must therefore be interpreted with caution. The sample in Brussels comprises a highly educated group, with 81% of the respondents having a bachelor's degree or higher, an average age that lies between 34 and 35 and a median work experience between 11 and 12 years. For Berlin, we can distinguish 92% of the respondents with a degree in higher education (including PhD). The average age is a bit higher and lies between 37 and 38, with a median work experience of 10 years. In Brussels 46% of the respondents studied in Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's school P.A.R.T.S. and in Berlin 24% went to Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz Berlin HZT. Both samples consist of predominantly female respondents and European citizens. In both cities, the majority combined being performer with other main occupations (such as choreographer) and held multiple jobs when they took the survey. Most of the jobs performed by the respondents in Brussels are activities related to artistic labor (74%). In Berlin, 30% of the time budget for work goes to para-

artistic activities (e.g., teaching) and 15% to non-artistic labor (e.g., bartending). This suggests that the Berlin respondents devote more time to activities not directly related to making art.

Artist support systems in comparison

In terms of social security, both cities have established interesting systems that support artists. In Belgium, artists commonly work with short employment contracts, whereas artists in Germany generally work self-employed. The 'artist status' in Belgium enables the application of the employee status in a freelance work regime; it comes with employee benefits, but the coverage of periods of non-employment through steady unemployment allowances is the most important one, since it creates a situation of stable income between short-term contracts. This kind of safety net is crucial, especially since most artists keep on practicing their profession in a situation of non-employment. However, only half of the respondents in Brussels have access to this status. In comparison, artists in Berlin can apply for membership at the Künstlersozialkasse, which coordinates the transfer of contributions to the health, pension and long-term care insurances. The members only have to pay half of the contributions due. One-fifth of the respondents are not registered at the KSK, of which the majority do not tend to have pension insurance at all. The KSK may reduce the high costs in social security associated with self-employment in Germany, yet this system does not reduce socio-economic precariousness in a significant way.

In Brussels, the median of average monthly net income lies within the category of 1,000 and 1,250 euros net. In Berlin, I asked to estimate the average year income divided by twelve without deducting insurance costs. The respondents indicated an average gross monthly income between 750 and 1,000 euros (median). Additionally, 62% of the Berlin respondents are remunerated for maximally half of their actual working hours, whereas in Brussels this is only true for 46% of the respondents. Indeed, the Berlin data reveal slightly lower incomes, especially since the Berlin-based respondents still need to pay rather high contributions to their mandatory insurances (plus taxes). Lastly, these estimated incomes in both cases certainly seem meager in the light of the high education level. The biggest issue seems to be the absence of fair payment for the delivered work effort.

The top motives for being active within the field of contemporary dance in both cities are artistic pleasure, life long learning and self-development. Overall, the respondents seem (very) satisfied about the substantive aspects of the profession. In either case, no significant relations result from the comparison of the satisfaction level and the average income categories, which might indicate that professional satisfaction does not seem to depend on income. This finding confirms the tendency toward self-precarization of all respondents: they seem willing to sacrifice material benefits, driven by immaterial income, such as the benefits of a relatively autonomous life dedicated to artistic preoccupations (seeing the respondents' top motives above).

Attractive dance hotspots – as of now

These outlined conditions indeed are precarious, so why do Brussels and Berlin continue to attract international dance artists? Brussels owes its status as dance capital to a relatively generous cultural policy, a constant influx of new dance talent (via P.A.R.T.S.) and its several established companies (Rosas, Ultima Vez), which have become part of the international canon. Indeed, when asked about the reasons for living in Brussels, the most recurring answers are work opportunities, Brussels' scene and Brussels as a base. However, according to many Brussels-based respondents, the prevailing working conditions still fail to reflect the general symbolic respect the profession receives.

By comparison, the contemporary dance field in Berlin had a growth spurt with the development of the Freie Szene and the arrival of dance artists such as Sasha Waltz, Xavier Le Roy or Meg Stuart. Berlin has proven to be an attractive base or mother ship for culturepreneurs due to its affordable living costs, the once large reservoir of unoccupied spaces since the collapse of the Wall, and a general open-mindedness of its inhabitants (Lange, *Die Räume der Kreativszenen* 2007). This is confirmed by respondents: the most recurring reasons for living in Berlin are cheap living, Berlin's vibe and artistic community.

Yet some comment that Berlin is at a turning point. The city is perceived as becoming more expensive and offering less alternative spaces. The funds are too small for everyone working in the field; thus, many hardly ever work in Berlin. The scene has become oversaturated. The Berlin-respondents were asked whether they consider moving away at some point and why? The majority (81%) reacted to this question and almost half of them explicitly assert they do because of Berlin's cold climate and the precariousness

in the arts. The lack of a pension and the resulting old age poverty (Altersarmut) are marked by 44% as top future worry, followed by parenthood and transition after dance. Lastly, similar to Brussels, the respondents remark that the profession seems to be respected as a full-fledged one within the sector, but this esteem does not translate into proper working conditions. Conclusively, though Brussels and Berlin may be reputed dance capitals, there still seems to be a long way to go to improve the socio-economic position of their artists.

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