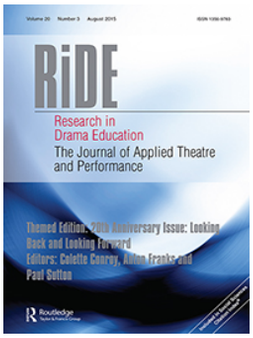

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance

ISSN: 1356-9783 (Print) 1470-112X (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/crde20

The tension between community and art

Eugene van Erven

To cite this article: Eugene van Erven (2015) The tension between community and art, Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance, 20:3, 407-410, DOI: 10.1080/13569783.2015.1059748

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2015.1059748

RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance, 2015
Vol. 20, No. 3, 407–410, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2015.1059748

The tension between community and art

Eugene van Erven*

Utrecht University, The Netherlands

In Holland we have a saying that there are as many managers of the Dutch national soccer team as there are Dutch citizens. Much the same could be said about interpretations of the term 'community arts', which carries different meanings in virtually every place around the world where it is uttered. In a detailed article that appeared in the Netherlands in 2013, François Matarasso traces the rise, fall and more recent attempts to rehabilitate the phrase (renamed 'participatory arts' by some) in the UK from the early 1970s to the present. He links these changes to substantial 'transformations of British society, economics, culture and thought' while over 40 years he detects within community arts a shift 'from radicalism to remedialism' (Matarasso 2013, 216). Other British commentators circumnavigate the semantic and ideological complexities of the term by replacing 'community' with the seemingly more neutral 'applied'. In turn, within the North American orbit Jan Cohen-Cruz dismisses this adjective because of its 'unfortunate association … with the professional who has all the answers and simply bestows (applies) them upon a community' (2010, 5). Instead, she opens up an even larger umbrella called 'Engaged Performance', so that mainstream productions with a progressive intention and more radical grassroots arts activities could claim kinship within one broad arts continuum. Placing the Broadway production of *Angels in America* next to a Boal-inspired activity in East L.A. between the covers of a scholarly book, however, turns out to be easier than having mainstream producers see eye to eye with neighbourhood-based arts activists. It is this tension and the ongoing debate about artistic quality within and around the field – which we in the Netherlands continue to call community arts – that I cursorily wish to explore here.

The term 'community arts' entered the Netherlands around the turn of the new millennium. A member of the Dutch Arts Council had come across it on a trip to England and introduced it to our country in conjunction with the equally problematic term 'social inclusion' and without being aware of its diminishing status in Britain. As a result, the phrase was officially launched in the Dutch Arts Council's pre-advice to the Minister of Culture on 14 April 2003 (Trienekens 2006, 6). Curiously, since then the Dutch have been using the English term, possibly because it sounds more sophisticated but also because the literal Dutch translation ('Gemeenschapskunst') is clumsy and contains unwelcome overtones of 'communion' and 'sexual intercourse'.[1] I must also personally assume part of the blame for the further influence of the term in Holland through my involvement in two festivals in Utrecht ('Art in My Backyard' in 2006 and 'The Community Arts Lab Festival' in 2013), the International Community

*Email: e.a.p.b.erven@uu.nl

Arts Festival (ICAF) in Rotterdam, and through the nationally operating Community Arts Lab-XL, which also manages a database of community arts projects. Today, much the same as 'applied theatre/arts' in Britain, in Holland 'community arts' has become widely accepted as the preferred term by practitioners, scholars, and policy makers. They use it rather loosely, however; conceptually it is seldom thoroughly unpacked.

Professionals involved in Dutch community art – both at the commissioning and at the delivery end of things – rarely bother to critically reflect on the ethics or political consequences of their activities. A partial explanation for this may be that during their training in arts schools and arts policy study programmes – but also afterwards – they are not sufficiently challenged in this direction.[2] Furthermore, the sparse Dutch academic discourse on the subject is heavily biased towards the social sciences and mostly written – in Dutch – to provide empirical evidence for justifying past or ensuring future funding for community arts. The awareness of the international discourse among the authors involved is also limited. A case in point is the essay collection *Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing*, edited by Gielen and De Bruyne (2011, reviewed by Bala 2012). The editors, who intend to connect the humanities and social sciences, suffer from a restricted familiarity with Dutch and international practices, but also from a rather eclectic theoretical frame. And although my own bilingual book and video package *Community Arts Dialogues* (2013), an analysis of five Dutch community arts projects, did introduce the work of these important scholars from the Anglo-Saxon world to its intended readership of Dutch community arts practitioners, it admittedly lacked theoretical depth.[3]

One of the central issues in *Community Arts Dialogues* concerns artistic quality and the yearning for mainstream recognition among artists working in community contexts. By documenting the intricacies of long-term and often messy processes and the difficulties of generating the best art possible under constantly shifting circumstances, the book tried to reveal and assess these projects in their totality, including their public manifestations. Three of the five projects resulted in events produced on site in areas that are high on the social problems index. With professional artists (actors, film makers, musicians) representing community material, they were cast in a performative idiom that was intended to attract mainstream audiences as well as local residents. Only one of the three succeeded in genuinely communicating with both groups across social and cultural divides through a poetic, visual, and musical aesthetic language that went beyond the literal. The main reason for that relative success was the three-year long residency and the unconditional commitment of the professional artists in the neighbourhood where the event was produced. In the other two cases the intensity (and duration) of the community immersion of the artists was much lower and the temptation to 'score' with the exoticism of the location in mainstream circles perhaps a bit too strong.

In order to understand this artistic status question in the Netherlands it is necessary to explain that – in addition to being trained to regard the autonomous, disinterested artist as the ultimate thing to strive for – a number of high profile artists have recently entered the 'problem neighbourhood' with participatory projects of their own. Collaborating with internationally renowned companies like *Toneelgroep Amsterdam* or presenting the work in the context of contemporary arts festivals (Spring, Oerol, Julidans), theatre artists like Adelheid Roosen and visual artists like Jeanne van Heeswijk get favourably reviewed by the same national media and by art theoreticians like Claire

Bishop (2012), who have surprisingly little first-hand knowledge of similar work by lesser known artists.

It is too easy to dismiss the mainstream success of site-specific projects by high profile artists as exotic exploitation or Bishop's prejudices with regards to participatory community arts as myopic. These developments also challenge the less visible projects and their authors to frame themselves differently and communicate what they are more effectively, particularly if they want to reach out to the broader world beyond the immediate context in which they operate. 'Mainstreaming' may even be necessary if powerful, high quality community art is to become part of what Matarasso has called 'the national conversation' in which other perspectives and lesser known stories join the dominant voices.[4] Not to do so is to risk further exclusion and a widening of the gap between polarised groups in society. Given the unwaning interest in the social turn, the expected continuation of cross-over work of community-inspired art, the need to expand the relevance of art beyond the usual 10% of higher educated members of society, and the insistence on increasing participation (both in society and in the arts), the debate about artistic quality in community art (or whatever else we want to call it) is bound to remain central in the years to come. And given the kind of scholarship that *RiDE* attracts, it should be right in the middle of that discourse.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Keywords: quality; community arts; The Netherlands

Notes

1. Strangely enough, the interchangeably used Dutch terms *wijktheater* and *buurttheater*, which literally mean 'neighbourhood theatre' and have been around since the late 1970s, were also widely replaced by the English term 'community theatre' in the course of the last decade.
2. Most professional arts training programmes in the Netherlands offer some B.A. modules which pay attention to community arts. Particularly B.A. programmes for drama and dance teachers and some M.A. programmes in Arts Education are positive exceptions to the rule. The majority of the arts colleges in Holland, however, still emphasize technique and stimulate students to think of themselves as autonomous artists rather than the more collaboratively inclined and diversely skilled professionals that 'social turn' practices require. Infrequently – for example through the seminars at ICAF (March 2014) or recent conferences like 'International Perspectives on Participation in the Arts' organized by the Netherlands Expertise Center for Amateur Art (LKCA, June 2014) – more critical reflection among practitioners and other professionals is now being encouraged.
3. This modest publication was not peer-reviewed, and is distributed for free. Its main aim was to reflect on recent practice for the benefit of community artists and other professionals in an easily accessible language.
4. Scott Rankin, the artistic director of Big hART, an Australian company that effectively mainstreams art products (performances, films, exhibitions) coming out of long-term community partnerships, ambitiously speaks of getting their best work included in the national canon.

References

Bala, Sruti. 2012. "Review of Community Art the Politics of Trespassing." *Research in Drama Education* 17 (1): 127–129.

Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso.
Cohen-Cruz, Jan. 2010. *Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response*. NewYork: Routledge.
De Bruyne, Paul, and Pascal Gielen, eds. 2011. *Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing*. Amsterdam: Valiz Antennae.
van Erven, Eugene. 2013. *Community Arts Dialogues*. Utrecht: Vrede van Utrecht.
Matarasso, François. 2013. "All in This Together: The Depoliticisation of Community Arts in Britain, 1970–2011." In *Community, Art, Power: Essays From ICAF 2011*, edited by Eugene van Erven. Rotterdam: RWT, 214–240.
Trienekens, Sandra. 2006. *Kunst en Sociaal Engagement: een analyse van de relatie tussen kunst, de wijk, en de gemeenschap* [Art and social engagement, an analysis of the relation beween art, the neighbourhood and the community]. Utrecht: Cultuurnetwerk.