Towards a New Cutting Edge: Where Avantgarde Meets Community Art

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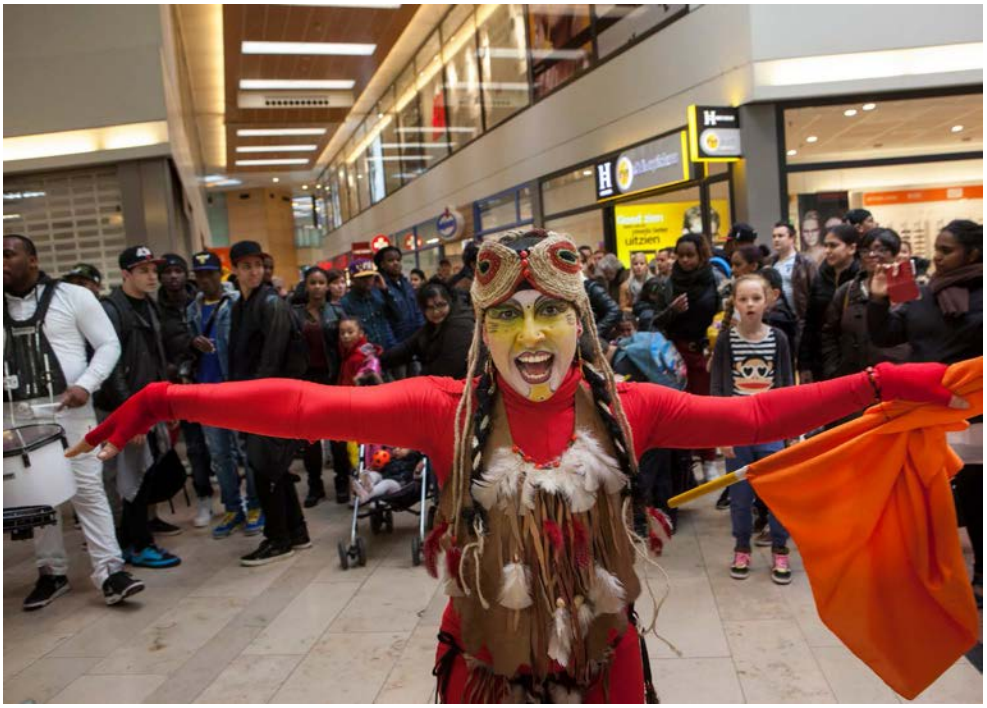

Those of us who have been trying to make sense of the aesthetic, social, and political dimensions of community-based performance—or more generally, participation in the arts—tend to be limited by our frame of reference, even if we have traveled wide and far or include examples from around the globe. Sometimes, our yearning for universal truths, neat models and typologies, or broadly applicable theory blurs, limits, or otherwise simplifies our view of a reality that is much more varied and resistant to forced categorization. At other times our own ideology or intercultural myopia gets in the way. Take the term "community theatre." Fifteen years ago I naively embraced it as something intrinsically positive and unproblematic—until Rustom Bharucha drew my attention to the violent exclusion of religious and ethnic others under the guise of what his compatriots call "communalism" (see for example Bharucha 1999). In his wake, a whole range of scholars East and West helped me complicate my notion of "community" and the participatory art practices linked to it.

Figure 1. Catalina Garcia of Barrio Comparsa during the International Community Arts Festival opening parade in Rotterdam, 26 March 2014. (Photo by Peter van Beek)

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Another eye opener was the sympathy for the participatory spirit of community art but an aversion to the term that I sensed among Czech artists. Recent experiences in South Africa and China, but also an increasing number of Western crossover experiments between mainstream, avantgarde, and community-based work, have prompted me to become even more careful with casual usage of the term. William Huizhu Sun's motivation for this *TDR* Consortium issue further strengthened my determination.

In his call for papers, Sun distinguished Chinese "collective, community-building performance in various groups, such as neighborhood afterschool programs, community performance clubs, and public space dance" from more activist, antiestablishment, or rebellious cultural manifestations, which he detects mostly in the West. An important function of studying these community-building performances elsewhere in the world, Sun continues, is "to help build a healthy, harmonious society with reasonable rules, when no imminent revolution is necessary" (Sun 2015). But what is "elsewhere in the world" or, indeed, "the West"? And is this division of practices perhaps too categorical? For example, on 16 April 2015 I witnessed a highly aesthetic sophisticated multimedia performance by Brian Tan Yeo Hui from Singapore (West? East?) that was clearly activist in nature, but not in form. Partly live and with a video component, he reconstructed a virtually undetectable movement piece that he had filmed in Singapore a few months prior to the event I attended, which was at the "Play, Perform, Participate" conference in Utrecht. The piece was subtle, poetic, intimate, private and yet exposed the many ways in which rules and regulations in public space limit freedom of movement and expression in his city state—and how they can be creatively circumvented. To the casual Singaporean passerby the "piece" was indistinguishable from normal daily life. To an experienced consumer of avantgarde theatre from outside Singapore the aesthetic performance might have been quite evident. To an initiated local it would have been a highly radical, highly aesthetic, and highly social performance all at once.

Or take the case of Barrio Comparsa (Neighborhood Parade), a community arts collective based in Medellín, Colombia. This location makes me wonder whether from a Chinese point of view Latin America is considered part of the West. From a European perspective Latin America's urban conglomerations may be regarded as superficial and Western, but in terms of indigenous cultures, class structures, and postcolonial issues—just to name a few local concerns—they are something else entirely. In Europe, we therefore prefer to speak in terms of the North vs. the South although even that division, like East vs. West, is becoming increasingly untenable. I also know that quite a few colleagues in Latin America don't even see the point of arranging the world and their position according to such divisions. They have more pressing concerns.

For the past 25 years, Barrio Comparsa has been actively involving community residents in the creation of artistic components for colorful street parades that are staged weekly or monthly in Medellín. On the surface, this practice would seem to put Medellín in Sun's "harmonious society" category, but a closer look reveals something different. The late 1980s were the height of drug boss Pablo Escobar's reign of terror in the Colombian city. No one dared to go out on the streets, which were effectively controlled by heavily armed gangs. In 1990, visual artist Luís Fernandez García and five of his friends decided that enough was enough. They gathered musical, theatrical, and visual artists and went out on the streets, literally taking them back from Escobar's cartel by means of a colorful, joyful, rhythmical parade—probably with the tacit

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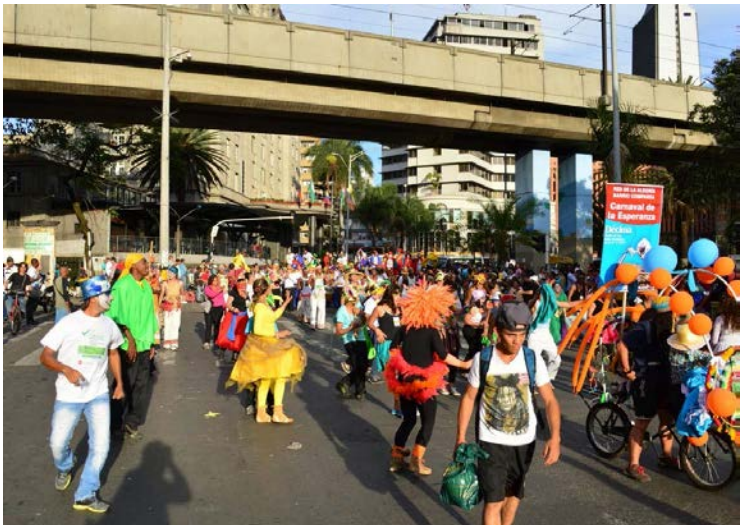


Figure 2. Barrio Comparsa Parade in Medellín, Colombia, 24 August 2014. (Photo by Barrio Comparsa)

permission of the cartel. García and his colleagues wanted to celebrate life and beauty in the face of death and destruction. They also knew that once would not be sufficient, so they have kept at it, performing regularly ever since, sometimes literally risking their lives in the process, ignoring the threats of the cartel.

They held the first parade in Calle 75c of their own Marinque Oriental neighborhood and later moved from street to street and from barrio to barrio, inventing an effective peer-to-peer methodology to spread the technology and philosophy of their work. Called "action-participation-transformation," their approach is deceptively simple. An action, for example, can be a parade you want to join that comes down your street. Participation occurs when one of your neighbors who is part of that parade facilitates a workshop in your area. You attend, learn to overcome your fear of the Other (this fear is common where violence is prevalent), you practice an art (dance, music, stilt walking, mask making), and you create the physical components of a parade. Then you go out on the streets and participate in the parade yourself. Transformation thus occurs quite naturally as these activities become a permanent fixture in your life. You pass on to friends and neighbors the artistic technology you have acquired. The event is harmonious and collective, yes—but also activist art, albeit gentler, more humane, and more positive than the strident protests and vehement polemics one usually associates with activism.

Our perspective on performance and on everything else is inevitably limited—if not downright blurred—by who we are and what we have experienced. In my own case, over the past 10 years my perspective has been inflected by productive but also conceptually unsettling encounters with indigenous artists from Canada, community artists from Latin America, and contemporary performance makers from the Czech Republic. In these places, my colleagues had developed different attitudes towards terms like "communal," "community," "communitas," or indeed even "avantgarde." Their work didn't fit neatly into what Western scholars have identified as the great traditions from which the community art (or participatory art, or applied art) of today is supposed to stem. In a highly condensed nutshell these traditions consist of:

1. an anthropological root that goes back to the beginning of humankind and that sees community art as the latest installment in what Victor Turner has called the "unstoppable urge of human beings to express themselves, to reflect on their existence and imagine ways in which it could be changed" (1985:10);
2. a political root connected to all manner of emancipation movements (including decolonization, "minorities," women, you name it) that often are accompanied by grassroots arts activities. This could be considered a kind of proto-community art created by collectively organized groups, directed at concrete political targets like dictators or colonial occupiers. Halfway through the '70s, the makers of this art discovered that active participation is much more effective than ramming alleged progressive messages down people's throats;

3. the avantgarde of the '50s, '60s, and '70s that searched for new inspirations in everyday reality. People such as Merce Cunningham and John Cage, but also—in a different way—Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba;
4. the community development movement. This occurred largely in progressive and predominantly Anglo-Saxon social work circles and was based on the idea that citizens should take control of their own environment. Tenant associations collaborated with community-based arts organizations specializing in graphic design, murals, and performance with the explicit aim to draw attention to local issues and improve conditions there (see Matarasso 2013).

All four of these roots have been investigated by predominantly Western humanities scholars such as Miwon Kwon ([2002] 2004); Sonja Kuftinec (2003); Grant Kester (2004, 2011); Jan Cohen-Cruz (2005, 2010, 2015); Petra Kuppers and Gwen Robertson (2007); Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston (2009); James Thompson (2009); Kate Crehan (2011); Shannon Jackson (2011), Claire Bishop (2012); and Helen Nicholson ([2005] 2014). On the other side of the divide—for there is indeed a huge abyss separating humanities scholarship from the social sciences—there is also a rapidly expanding corpus, mostly in the form of articles and/or in-house evaluation reports, empirically assessing the social impact of this participatory art practice.[1] This divide—and the undeniable need to address and bridge it—requires a different study than what I can provide in this article. Suffice it to say that, at least in Europe, there is now a willingness to develop interdisciplinary research methods in which artists, participants, humanities scholars, and social scientists work side by side to develop a common language with which to make sense of all manner of social arts practices. What's sorely needed is continuous cross-disciplinary translation and sharing.

One of the biggest challenges in thinking and communicating about this enormously diverse and complex field we call participatory, social, applied, or community art is our inevitably limited frame of reference in terms of academic discipline, theory, ideology, languages we speak, practical examples on which we draw, not to mention an infinite number of identity markers that inflect our own words and thoughts. Speaking for myself, I am a 61-year-old heterosexual male who was born in a working-class family in the rural south of Holland and who, after migrating north in the early '60s and thanks to a partly government-sponsored university education in the Netherlands and the USA, moved up to middle-class status. I have been married to a Surinamese-Aruban nurse for 25 years and together we have three ethnically mixed children. Those things do affect my outlook.

I am sure my origins sparked in me an interest in political theatre, which in the 1980s I began documenting and imperfectly theorizing from a naive neo-Marxist or liberational perspective, first in the West and later in parts of Asia. In the early '90s that interest began to shift to community-based performance and later expanded to include all art forms that contained an explicitly social dimension demanding full participation. Since then, I have tried to document this art practice through fieldwork in different parts of the world. Since 2006, I have mostly concentrated on the Netherlands. Through my involvement with the International Community Arts Festival (ICAF) in Rotterdam, however, I am able to stay relatively well informed about developments elsewhere. New media artists, public space designers, dancers, musicians, visual artists, indigenous performers who have managed to break into the mainstream without severing their roots to their own communities come to Rotterdam from as

1. There are literally hundreds of titles and scores of research institutes that operate in this field. Some examples are the Princeton Center for Art and Cultural Policy Studies, The Social Impact of the Art Project at the University of Pennsylvania, and similar institutes in the UK, Australia, and Canada. *The Community Development Journal* and *Artwork Magazine* regularly publish studies on the social impact of community arts. I have included literature reviews by Helen Jermyn (2004), Tony Newman et al. (2003), and Michelle Reed (2002) in the references; as well as books by Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett (2008) and François Matarasso (1997).

far afield as Durban, South Africa; Roeburn, Western Australia; Manitoulin Island, Canada; East Los Angeles, California; Bronx, New York; Glover, Vermont; Lima, Peru; Medellín, Colombia; Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Manila, the Philippines; Pnomh Penh, Cambodia; and all over Europe. Through ICAF I came into contact with Archa Theatre in Prague, which—although sympathetic to the spirit of what we in Holland call community art—was allergic to the term. They also had developed a somewhat different practice, which I will address. In any event, along with my personal history and the journeys I have made over more than 30 years—both local and foreign—the International Community Arts Festival network and the diverse Dutch community arts practice constitute my frame of reference. While it may seem vast, it is still extremely limited—and biased.

Nowhere do we realize our own myopia more acutely than when we are confronted with the thoroughly researched, erudite, and eloquent work of fellow scholars. Their writing offers surprising insights that force us to open our minds. But they also reveal gaps, every bit as much as our own work inevitably does. It is our task as scholars to fill in these gaps, for only then do flaws in theory and history, which derive from these blind spots, become visible. And so we stumble, fall into the holes we dig for ourselves, crawl out again, and move on—only to stumble again and again.

Miwon Kwon's frame of reference, for example, is limited by her personal taste for installation and sculptural art in public space in the United States between 1960 and 2000. Her book *One Place After Another* ([2002] 2004) is nevertheless useful for pointing out a connection between community-based art practices and the neo-avantgarde; for complicating our notion of "community" as an unstable construct rather than a coherent, unified social structure; and for piercing through the "halo-like armature of social do-goodism" that Kwon sees too many community artists adopt to evade serious artistic criticism of their work (in Phillips 1998).

Kwon is equally skeptical of claims of "empowerment," which to her mind are based on the flawed argument that community art is "a special form of unalienated labor, or at least provisionally outside of capitalism's forces" ([2002] 2004:97). She is particularly critical of the all too easy equation of "artistic self-representation" with "political self-determination" (97). All these issues have been even more forcefully taken up by Claire Bishop in her provocative book *Artificial Hells* (2012). Strangely, Bishop ignores Kwon and most of the other Anglo-Saxon humanities scholars I mentioned earlier. Bishop's frame of reference is limited and biased in other significant ways as well.

Before addressing Bishop, I want to briefly mention the work of Jan Cohen-Cruz. Cohen-Cruz attempts to close the gaps between performance studies and the social sciences and between community art and the mainstream art world. She dismisses the term "applied art," which is favored in the UK where the term refers to an array of instrumental art practices including art and development, art therapy, art in educational settings, and art for rehabilitation, as well as community-based art. Cohen-Cruz finds this kind of work too obsessed with fixing social problems and not concerned enough with art. As an alternative, she reintroduces Sartre's term "engaged art" designating a broad spectrum that, in her mind, ranges from Boal to Kushner. What unites this field, she believes, is "the artists' actively committed relationship to the people most affected by their subject matter" (Cohen-Cruz 2010:9). She particularly stresses the reciprocal nature of this relationship, although she sidesteps some of its power-related complexities a little too easily. Cohen-Cruz's work, however, sets a high standard for how to write critically about both process and product and the social and artistic dimensions of diverse United States–based projects.

In *Engaging Performance* (2010), but even more emphatically in her earlier book *Local Acts* (2005), Cohen-Cruz introduces the consensus-dissensus criterion that Bishop employs to dismiss—or ignore—a huge chunk of participatory art. Cohen-Cruz, always intent on building bridges, uses it to *include* various forms of community-based art in an expanded continuum that ranges from ritual to art. Closer to the ritual end she places those more folkloristic art prac-

tices that confirm existential values and conserve cultural forms of a relatively homogeneous group. She also detects a totalizing danger in more extreme forms of ritually oriented community art such as nationalistic pageants, by the way, because they may engender more violent forms of excluding Others. Closer to the art end of the spectrum Cohen-Cruz places work that is more open-ended, that asks rather than answers, and that refreshes people's perspectives (2005:86–87). The expanded spectrum proposed by Cohen-Cruz challenges the idea that collective, cocreated community-based (social) performance can only confirm and not contest.[2] It also brings us back to Bishop and restricted frames of reference.

With the possible exception of Mike Sell's *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism* (2008), Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (2012), better than most publications I know, meticulously uncovers the avantgarde roots of contemporary participatory art. It also links them usefully to little known participatory experiments in the former Czechoslovakia, which goes some way towards explaining the reluctant embrace of community art by Czech artists; I will return to this later. Particularly Bishop's inclusion of avantgarde experiments in the former Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia between the mid '60s and the late '80s are fascinating as they "problematise contemporary claims that participation is synonymous with collectivism" (2012:4). Under state socialism these forms of intimate participatory art served as "a means to create a privatized sphere of individual expression"—an ephemeral sensation of freedom in "a society where privacy was all but eliminated" (149).

In chapter 5, Bishop describes an intriguing series of examples that could best be described as invisible Happenings and which seem similar in nature to the performance in Singapore I referred to in my opening paragraph. They included the purely semantic framing of the entire city of Bratislava as a temporary work of art in May 1965; artistic presentations of found events, like an actual rural wedding in 1972 as performance; apartment art (apt-art) in Moscow; and a pseudo-secret date among trusted colleagues to meet in a rural field to watch two figures approach in the distance. Bishop likes these experiments because they stimulate, "difference, dissensus and debate: a space of privatised experience, liberal democratic indecision, and a plurality of hermeneutical speculation at a time when the dominant discourse and spectatorial regime was marshaled towards a rigidly schematised apparatus of meaning" (160).

The above quotation is indicative of an undertone that runs through *Artificial Hells* implying that participatory art celebrating community consensus is artistically less worthy and potentially totalizing. For all her sharp reasoning and thorough documentation, Bishop gives no indication of actually personally having seen any of the contemporary work she dismisses as unaesthetic, politically correct, overly cautious, and "tends to self-censor out of fear that underprivileged collaborators will not be able to understand more disruptive modes of artistic production" (190). Instead, she bases her arguments on examples from the world she knows best: installations and experimental performance projects that contain strong visual art elements; works that have been created onsite in collaboration with local residents of marginal neighborhoods. These tend to be well-documented projects authored by internationally known nomadic artists like Thomas Hirschhorn and Jeanne van Heeswijk. They are connected to prestigious arts events like the Venice Biennale, Manifesta, or Documenta which lend them a priori artistic status: their visual and verbal records end up as valuable artifacts in archives or exhibitions at institutions like the Tate or MoMA.

I would have loved if Bishop had applied her sharp mind and pen to community-based participatory art projects, but many of these unfortunately are beyond her scope of vision and, despite what they may seem on the surface, are quirky, challenging, and full of contradictory

2. This notion was also addressed by Grant Kester in a short essay he published in *ICAF: An Extensive Report* (van Erven 2009:169–72). He elaborates the idea more fully in his most recent book *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (2011).

layers. And because she doesn't, others must. Bishop's book does throw down some very tempting gauntlets: to further scrutinize connections between contemporary participatory arts and the avantgarde (for example in places like the Czech Republic *after* 1989, which Bishop completely ignores); to improve the quality of the documentation of these projects; and to rigorously critique both their artistic *and* social dimensions. Bishop is right when she urges us "to learn to think both fields together and devise adequate new languages and criteria for communicating these transversal practices" (2012:274). She is also right that too many participatory arts projects of the consensual kind unwittingly play into the hands of Western neoliberal governments. But she is wrong when she claims that the examples she draws on are the only ones capable of communicating "on two levels—to participants and to spectators—the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew" (284).

To illustrate my point I present two examples, one from the Czech Republic and another from the Netherlands.

Solo for Lu was cocreated in 2013 by Chinese migrant Jing Lu and Czech theatre director Jana Svobodová, and was produced by Archa Theatre in the Czech Republic. This company originated in 1994 and was the first to bring the Bread and Puppet Theater to Prague and later began collaborating with Welfare State International from England and Dogtroep from Holland. Over the years, Archa developed a strong interest in highly visual, technology-driven, site-specific aesthetic performance styles in which live music played a substantial part. Today, the company has a steady audience base among Prague intellectuals but also increasingly connects with disenfranchised communities, which according to Bishop were ignored under Communist rule "because class difference ostensibly did not exist" (130). But surely ethnic differences did. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, as Svobodová has observed, very different migration and refugee patterns have emerged in the Czech Republic than in southern and western Europe. Many migrants originate in the Middle East, Asia, and the Caucasus; former Russian army barracks in the countryside serve as holding camps for asylum seekers. Archa's artistic collaboration with Jing Lu, one such Asian migrant, is a fascinating example of cutting edge community art that accomplishes what Bishop thinks it is incapable of.

Troubled by an increasing number of racist incidents towards Roma, immigrants, and asylum seekers, Archa decided in 2005 to create a production in an asylum-seekers camp, Bělá pod Bezdězem. The idea was to draw audiences from Prague to the facility, which is based in former Russian army barracks located 78 kilometers northeast of the Czech capital. The original plan was to have only professionals perform, but during preparations it became increasingly clear that the residents wanted to be included in the show. Moreover, artistic director Jana Svobodová discovered there were quite a few talented musicians living in the camp who had not touched their instruments since escaping from various places in the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Far East. The result was *V 11:20 tě opouštím* (I'm Leaving You at 11:20), a stunning performance in which professionals acted and played music alongside asylum seekers who were of diverse ages and cultural backgrounds. Production values, design, and mise-en-scène were of the highest professional quality, but the caliber of the social interactions between the artists from Prague and the camp residents was extraordinary as well.[3] The two groups continue to collaborate to this day on numerous follow-up activities. One of the most spectacular outcomes of this collaboration is, undoubtedly, the creation of the Allstar Refjúdží Band (www.asrb.cz), a very popular orchestra composed of professional and amateur musicians from Prague performing with documented and undocumented immigrants.

3. Czech filmmaker Pavel Koutecký made a 30-minute documentary about the creation of this show. It is not available online but a copy can be ordered through archa@archatheatre.cz.

As a collective community-based art project, the Allstar Refjúdží Band is an example of artistic output that contradicts the assumption behind Bishop's dismissal of this kind of participatory practice. The way in which musical director Michael Romanyshyn describes the differences among band members is instructive:

> We're not a like-minded group of people. [...] The political beliefs in the Allstar Refjúdží Band run the spectrum—almost. There are the older Czechs and Slovaks with a decidedly pro-West, anti-Russian sentiment; our Armenian accordion player from Georgia, whose kids had knives put to their throats and their mouths duct taped shut by thugs involved in the Armenian/Azerbaijani conflict—he's understandably nostalgic for the Soviet days; our Chinese singer, Lu, has complicated and multifaceted opinions on the Chinese government and is politically at odds with some of the other members; the Swiss singer is a social democrat; our Kurdish singer likes George W. Bush because he helped to create Kurdistan; the young Czech and Slovak members in the band tend to be conservative; and I'm an anarchist (2013:50).[4]

Figure 3. Jing Lu performing with the Allstar Refjúdží Band at ICAF, Rotterdam, 30 March 2011. (Photo by Clémence Girard)

At the end of 2008, the Allstars recorded their first album. It included a song called "Homesick," written by Syrian-Kurdish musician Miran Kasem. Yearning for home was a theme that applied to everyone in the band. To illustrate this, Romanyshyn added a verse and asked Jing, a member of the band, to sing it and to join Kasem in the finale. But in the studio, Kasem refused to perform with Lu because according to Kurdish tradition, men and women do not sing together. Over the years, however, hardened conservative positions have shifted through continuous interactions with an Other, particularly within the framework of ongoing community arts projects that do not gloss over uncomfortable differences. Romanyshyn explains:

4. In 2008, Jana Svobodová invited former Bread and Puppet musical director Michael Romanyshyn to help her create a musical band for a show entitled *Dance through the Fence.* Romanyshyn's full story about how the Allstar Refjúdží Band was born and the cultural and political clashes within it, is included *Community Art Power* (Romanyshyn 2013). Romanyshyn's quotations come from this source.

> Three years later, Miran invited Lu and me to join him for a few songs onstage at a Kurdish New Year's celebration attended by many of the Kurds living in Prague. Hanging as a backdrop on the stage, in the large modern auditorium on the outskirts of Prague, were large photos of Kurdish revolutionary leaders. Well-dressed young men and women sat at round tables drinking and eating. When it came time for Miran to perform, he was greeted warmly; everyone knew him. Our first song was "Homesick," the same song he had refused to sing with Lu three years before. This time, in front of several hundred fellow Kurds, they sang it together. (2013:51)

Romanyshyn's discussion of this intercultural process, one of many ongoing in his band—and I daresay in many community arts projects—is as sound as they come. He does not simplistically reject tradition as undesirable conservatism. Himself the son of immigrants to the United States he is deeply aware that tradition provides security and predictability in an uncertain and unfamiliar new world. But he also knows that when "a random collection of cultures confronts an old, closed and resistant one like the Czech Republic's, the clash is disruptive and though the repercussions are predictable the results are not. Something new arises from the clash and mixing of all those ingredients" (52). It's a new kind of Czech, one with Kurdish, Chinese, and other inflections.

Nowhere is this hybridization process more explicit than in *Solo for Lu*, based on the real life story of Jing Lu. The show is an intimate tale about migration from China to the Czech Republic. It is coded as aesthetic performance art, falling into the avantgarde personal disclosure category of the genre. Jing Lu is alone onstage for the full hour and 30 minutes of the show. She has a few different sets of clothes at her disposal, a wooden box with objects, a small table with musical instruments, and a sampler that allows her to create her own techno soundtrack live onstage.[5] The result is a highly dynamic theatrical account of how a young Chinese woman became Czech, but not quite.

Jing Lu's Song and Dance

Solo for Lu is a collage of times, places, cultures, and confused identities that intersect in Jing Lu's body. She offers us fragments from her life that are precariously held together by the frame of the show (the space, the lights, the temporal duration) and her personal charm, humor, voice, and physical presence. The net effect is that any generic impression of "*the* Chinese" yields to a much more complicated sense of the many different things that might constitute a Chinese individual living in Prague. Those elements include traditional aspects like the meaning of names, the significance of birth years (Jing was born in the Year of the Rooster), nostalgic yearning for the common Chinese fried dough called *youtiao*, and Empress Wu Zetian as a personal inspiration (admired for her willpower and patience). But Jing is much more than the sum of the fragments she chooses to display. She came to Prague 18 years ago with her parents, who have both since died. She has been married twice and claims to have several sons, although we are never really sure we can believe her. And she occasionally works as an interpreter. In the show, Jing takes us to a Czech cookie factory where only "yesterday" she interpreted for a Chinese delegation. To illustrate the experience—and her intercultural position—she performs the roles of delegates Mr. Wang, Engineer Li, and Mrs. Chong, as well as Czech factory executive Mr. Vanický: "Engineer Li would like to know how many employees you have? He says that in China it's better to have an even number of employees. Engineer Li recommends 322 since 3+2+2=7. Seven is a lucky number for you Europeans" (Jing and Svobodová 2013).

Solo for Lu continuously meanders between present and past, fact and fiction, Prague and the Chinese city of Wu Han. We learn that Jing's father was a diving champion in Wu Han. Her

5. The following analysis is based on a performance recorded in December 2013 in Prague and a translation provided by director Jana Svobodová.

mother worked at a station for cargo trains and became pregnant with her second child during a time when only one was allowed. We also find out that Jing was a talented singer and dancer, but that at age 10 she wasn't accepted into the local dance conservatory because she did not meet the physical standard: she was too short and too fat. Jing takes us back to different scenes from her past, performing different characters, including her younger self. We never find out how exactly her parents ended up in Prague. But we do learn how she continues to cherish Chinese traditions like the mid-autumn festival, how she graduated from a Czech high school, and how eventually she qualified for a residency permit.

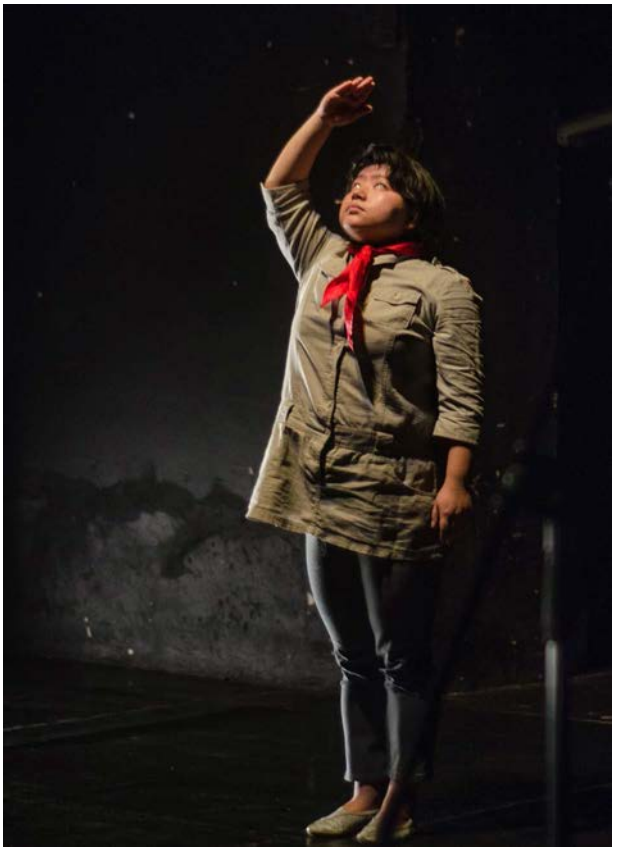
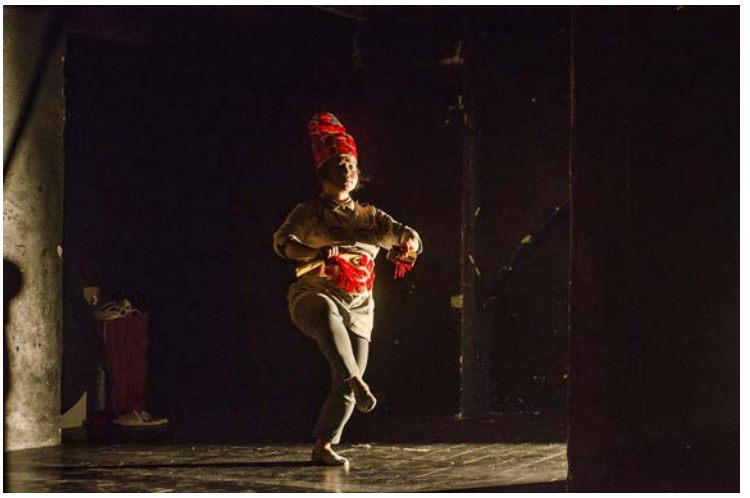


Figure 4. Jing Lu indicates that she is too short to become a dancer in China. Archa Theatre, 13 December 2013. (Photo by Petr Salaba)

The final segment of *Solo for Lu* is a fantasy about the future. Jing imagines that in 2030 she will still be in the Czech Republic, that by then she will own Vanický's cookie factory, that Mr. Wang will have become her vice president of export, and that their specialty will be based on an old recipe allegedly invented by Empress Wu Zetian during the Tang Dynasty. Relentlessly, Jing's solo gravitates towards a haunting poetic conclusion in which she sings and dances, something she wasn't allowed to do in China. We witness her nostalgically hopping from shop window to shop window in the dimly lit snow-covered streets of Prague, realizing that her body may have escaped but that she will forever carry China within her. Even while she holds hands with her new Czech boyfriend, shivering outside in the cold European winter, China remains inescapably present within her:

> The lights in the shops dim and he'll say
> Like the plastic bracelets and ringlets:
> You're Made in China
> Like all the toys and trinkets:
> You're Made in China
> Like the cameras to use and dispose:
> You're Made in China
> Like the thorns and leaves of an artificial rose:
> You're made in China. (Jing and Svobodová 2013)

Solo for Lu falls within my definition of community art: it is the result of a long-term reciprocal collaboration between an artist and a community member to aesthetically express a story,



perspective, or experience of a marginal community within a particular society that would not otherwise get presented on its own terms in public. It's polemic and aesthetic, contradictory and fragmented, and as a performance it staunchly refuses to neatly fit into any existing category, just like Jing Lu herself. This show emphatically rejects generic stereotypes of diasporic Chinese.

Figure 5. Jing Lu finally dances. Archa Theatre, 13 December 2013. (Photo by Petr Salaba)

Jaoualia's Headscarf

At this juncture, I had originally intended to analyze a Dutch community theatre production that involved the active participation of 50 Chinese migrants.[6] On second thought, however, a more recent example involving the participation of three young Muslim women might provide more contrast while making a similar point about the impossibility of making neat community theatre categories.

Meysara is the result of a unique collaboration between theatre maker Jasmina Ibrahimovic and three young women, two of whom had never before performed. Ibrahimovic herself is of Bosnian origin. When a young girl, she and her mother fled to the Netherlands. The three actresses—who have been friends for a long time—hail from Turkey (Leyla Cakir) and Morocco (Fatima Lamkharrat and Jaoualia Ouazizi). Like Ibrahimovic, they've lived most of their lives in the Netherlands. They consider themselves predominantly Dutch, although they are often perceived as foreign or Other. Ouazizi is the only one with some stage experience. Although she has acted in several amateur youth theatre productions in Rotterdam, she became increasingly disenchanted with the kind of shows she was in. The straw that broke the camel's back for her was when she was asked to wear a wig over her headscarf.

Because Ouazizi wanted to make theatre that was relevant to her and the times, in the fall of 2013 she approached Ibrahimovic, whom she had heard about through mutual friends. Ibrahimovic, a part-time director with the Rotterdam Neighborhood Theatre (RWT)[7] was immediately interested. Like Ouazizi and her two friends, she was deeply troubled by the Islamophobia rapidly infecting the country. This first encounter between Ibrahimovic and the three friends occurred a few months after populist Dutch politician Geert Wilders repeatedly called for the deportation of Moroccan migrants during a controversial parliamentary election campaign. His opportunistic statements were the culmination of steadily growing nationwide anti-Muslim sentiments that boiled down to generally blaming all Dutch Muslims for the

6. The show was called *Zhōng*, which means "the middle" or "point of encounter" in Mandarin. It was produced onsite in the Old West neighborhood of Rotterdam by Rotterdams Wijktheater (RWT) and was performed 16 times for close to 2,000 spectators in June and July 2011. It included plenary scenes for the entire audience of 120 people and more intimate scenes that were repeated for smaller groups of 20 that walked from location to location, following different routes.

7. RWT is the same company that produces the triennial International Community Arts Festival that I direct. I was also one of Jasmina Ibrahimovic's professors at Utrecht University (Ibrahimovic 2015).

crimes of a relatively few troublemakers and the actions of radicalized youth. This Islamophobia has intensified further in the wake of several bloody IS-inspired terrorist attacks in Paris in January and November 2015, and in Belgium in 2016. And even more recently, the arrival in the Netherlands of tens of thousands of mostly Syrian refugees is perceived by the xenophobes as further justification for their Islamophobia. Ibrahimovic, Cakir, Lamkharrat, and Ouazizi in their play wanted to present an alternative to the stigma attached to Muslims.

In January 2014, in typical Dutch community theatre fashion,[8] Ibrahimovic, Lamkharrat, Cakir, and Ouazizi began by informally chatting about shared experiences, personal stories, and family histories. They explored subtle intracultural differences among Moroccans (between Berber and Arab) and between Moroccans and Turks. Soon they started to improvise in weekly sessions, reenacting situations and then analyzing them. All of these activities were documented in detailed notes, which Ibrahimovic processed into a script during the month of March. In April and May, the four women rehearsed and collectively worked out a mise-en-scène. By the end of May, *Meysara* was ready for its first try-out performance in the cultural center Islemunda, the new home of RWT in the eastern suburb of Ysselmonde. Since then *Meysara* has been performed 13 times for close to 900 culturally mixed spectators, including many young Muslims.

The title "Meysara" refers to the name Lamkharrat's character intends to give to her unborn child. In the eighth and final scene of the play, she addresses her baby girl directly by talking into the lens of a video camera held by a spectator. Meysara, she explains, comes from two Arabic words: "meysa," meaning "she who walks proudly" and "Ara," meaning: "opinion." The tension between these two words, between the struggle to construct a dignified identity on one's own terms and the unavoidable, continuous social and cultural pressure on that individual process, dramaturgically permeates the play.

Meysara opens very informally. As the spectators walk in, the three actresses greet them seemingly in their authentic identities as Fatima Lamkharrat, Leyla Cakir, and Jaoualia Ouazizi. Lamkharrat makes no bones about the intentions she and her partners have with this performance: "More and more frequently I feel that I am being pushed into an amorphous group [...,] a group that is being attacked and accused of everything and then some. So I think it is time that I introduce myself properly."[9] Thus, the three women, somewhat self-conscious, gradually reveal fragments of who they are, or who they believe they are. They perform in a flexible, self-referential, humorous theatre form that gradually takes shape while their fragmented narratives unfold before and among us. "I want to tell my story in my own voice," proclaims Ouazizi, "without anyone else interpreting it for me." But who they are and what their play is about remains unstable until the very end. Their identities continuously elude them. They agree and disagree that this is—but also isn't—a play about Muslim women, about migrants, about being pigeonholed, about emancipation, about repressed women, or headscarves. "So what on earth is this play about then?" Cakir asks in exasperation at the end of the play's first scene. Lamkharrat explains: "We want to show who we are at the core of our being. Who we are when you take away the context." For once Ouazizi agrees with her, while directly addressing the audience: "All the images that others have of us are layers that hide that core. In other words, we do not exist without you."

In the six scenes that follow, the three women take turns peeling away contextual layers that others believe define them. They support each other by playing roles of relatives whenever it is dramaturgically required. But they also frequently step out of character to comment, question, or criticize each other. For example, in the second scene, Ouazizi talks about how as

8. For a detailed description of this approach, see my *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives* (2001:53–92).

9. All quotations from *Meysara* are taken from the revised script of February 2015 (Ibrahimovic et al. 2015). The analysis is based on two live performances I witnessed on 25 May 2014 and on 2 April 2015, both in Islemunda, Rotterdam. The English translations are mine.

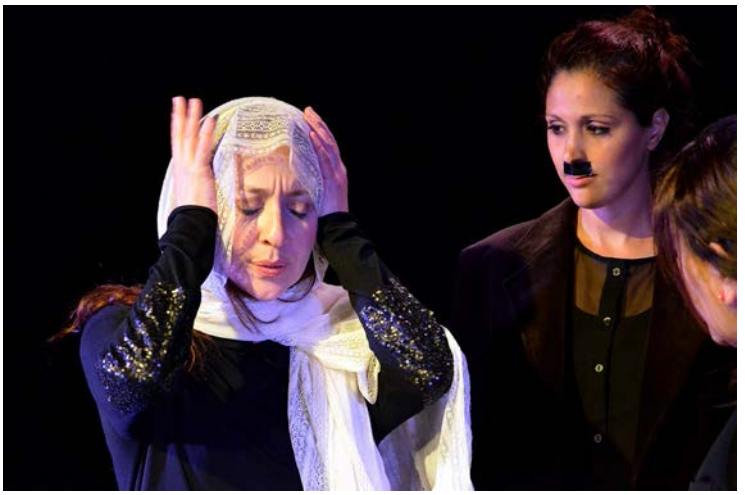


Figure 6. (From left) Leyla Cakir plays her mother while Jaoualia Ouazizi plays Leyla's father. Meysara *performance in Islemunda, Rotterdam, 2 April 2015. (Photo by Kees Deenik)*

a primary school kid she was constantly trying to navigate between the Dutch world in public space and the Moroccan world at home. Immediately Lamkharrat gets on her case by warning her not to sound too much like a victim. The show is filled with many such humorous, pseudo-aggressive interruptions whenever a scene or a narrative threatens to go into an undesirable direction that might confirm rather than complicate stereotypes.

Scenes three and four are cases in point. They feature Lamkharrat's story. Before she was 17 years old, she migrated at least seven times with her parents and six siblings, back and forth between Holland and Morocco. She explains that she is in favor of women's liberation but against Western feminism. She is a practicing Muslim who doesn't wear a headscarf but who at age 16 got sucked into an arranged marriage. At this point Cakir interrupts Lamkharrat's tale to ask whether she thinks it is such a good idea to air her dirty laundry in public. "But it is my own story," Fatima asserts. "I am not going to adapt it because someone may be narrow-minded!" And in the remainder of her tale, Lamkharrat succeeds very well in stripping away any stereotypical residue that might have clouded the audience's perception. She divorces, and with the help of an uncle, she escapes back to Holland. She exploits the Dutch condemnation of Moroccan arranged marriages to get accepted in a Dutch school in the middle of the academic year when such a thing is normally not allowed. But she also makes use of the Moroccan law that stipulates that after a divorce the family-in-law must pay a sum for each year of marriage. Fatima concludes triumphantly: "And with that money I bought a brand new, bright red Peugeot 306 convertible, in which I drove back to Morocco to sign the divorce papers!"

Scenes five and six demonstrate two different performance styles employed in *Meysara*, shifting from physical storytelling theatre to an explicitly polemical spoken-word performance style. In scene five Cakir talks about her childhood in the south of Holland where, at age 23, and only a few months before 9/11, she was elected the first female chairperson of their local mosque. In scene six, Lamkharrat and Ouazizi join her in a fictional address to Dutch politicians. They take turns firing statements and questions at parliament:

> Can you explain why I am suddenly no longer Fatima the neighbor or Fatima the colleague, but a mere generic Moroccan or Muslim? I have been living next to you for almost my entire life. I played in your yard, in your house. You *know* who I am! Tell me, is this the country where I can safely raise my children?

After this energetic, pseudo-angry choral appeal, the three young women don headscarves and, seated side-by-side, they perform moving, poetic tributes to their mothers. They first play their mothers, who talk about the villages they grew up in and how they met their husbands. Cakir's mother, Güle, met hers while working in the local bakery and Ouazizi's mother, also named Fatima, originally refused to marry the man her parents had arranged for her—because she found him too ugly. All three feisty mothers then talk about how they experienced migra-

Figure 7. (From left) Leyla Cakir, Fatima Lamkharrat, and Jaoualia Ouazizi play their mothers. Meysara *performance, Islemunda, Rotterdam, 2 April 2015. (Photo by Kees Deenik)*

tion and their first encounters with Dutch culture. Unlike the other two, Ouazizi's mother stayed behind in Morocco for 22 years before finally moving to the Netherlands: "Living apart together, I can recommend it to anyone. He came home two months per year, treated me like a princess, and has always stayed in love with me."

At the end of scene seven, the three mothers take turns talking to their daughters, asking them to speak well of them. Sure, they may have some regrets, but generally the mothers are satisfied with the choices they made and proud of their daughters in whom they recognize plenty of themselves. Then they rise, grab each other's hands and sing the Dutch national anthem. They add a subtle satirical twist, however, proclaiming allegiance to their Turkish and Moroccan ancestry as well as to the Netherlands. Their double-edged message is echoed in the final scene in which Fatima addresses her unborn daughter, Meysara. She reluctantly advises her to stay in Holland, despite the many challenges, the fear, and the uncertainty. It is the same hesitation all three young women have continuously expressed throughout the play—about who they are, where they want to be, and where they want to go. It is aptly underscored by their last words:

> Is this the end? What has this play been about? Not about immigrants, Moroccans, Turks, Dutchmen, nationality, pride, borders, women—certainly not about Muslim women—men, emancipation, or headscarves. This show is about us. Jaoualia, Leyla and Fatima. Pleased to meet you!

Solo for Lu and *Meysara* are two very different Western community arts enterprises in terms of performance styles and both their social and artistic dimensions. They are relevant because they productively challenge the Western/non-Western, aesthetic/social performance dichotomies that Sun formulated in his CFP for this *TDR* issue. Both productions are the result of an open-minded creative collaboration between, on the one hand, a Czech and a Dutch theatre maker and, on the other, a Czech-Chinese, a Dutch-Turkish, and two Dutch-Moroccan

participants with relatively little stage experience. *Solo for Lu* was explicitly designed for Prague's middle-class audience as well as for international festival gigs. *Meysara* catered to a cultural and social mix of regular theatregoers and neighborhood residents, including Moroccan and Turkish friends and relatives of cast members who had never before entered a theatre. It was obviously less developed in terms of performance skills than *Solo for Lu*, but director Jasmina Ibrahimovic managed to turn these limitations into assets by foregrounding the charm, irony, and authenticity of the three performers.

Both productions could, therefore, be considered a balanced mix of aesthetic and social performance that avoids becoming explicitly activist or too comfortably harmonious. In the final analysis, both *Solo for Lu* and *Meysara* are capable of communicating—perhaps even more powerfully than the high-profile installation art Claire Bishop favors—"on two levels—to participants and to spectators—the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew" (Bishop 2012:284). Using high-quality experimental theatrical forms they succeed in subtly revealing surprising and sometimes contradictory nuances of the many different ways one can be Turkish or Moroccan in Holland or Chinese in the Czech Republic. In the collaborations between the professional artists and the participants, but also in the live communications between performers and spectators, the view of the Other inevitably shifted and something new was added to that slippery thing we call "cultural identity."

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