

THE FACTS AND FIXIONS OF B-LONGING

Delphine Hesters, December 2006

In search of a community

The issue raised in this article follows on the issue raised in the *B-Chronicles* research project¹ where it first came about: *what is the meaning of 'community' in times of transnational mobility?*

The international make-up of contemporary dance is above all the result of the 'transnational mobility' of dancers and dance-makers. Although these configurations are highly unstable, the term *dance community* has grown steadily more popular in the last decade, and it is a term which is generally compounded with a geographical location. The *Brussels* dance community is the result of such a successful and widespread merging of belonging and geographical location. It is a concept that is used in the discourses of governments, but also of all sorts of dance professionals, here in Belgium and abroad.

It has been suggested that communities always have an imaginary dimension, as if they were fictive constructions with reality effects.² But more so than a 'fiction', it is a 'fixion' which seems to be at work in the discourse on communities. It is as if the fantasies surrounding the boundless and fluid artistic existence of dance artists also required some kind of fixation, as if so much instability needed to be mapped out and given fixed, concrete coordinates. Sarma has invited me to study this complex construction from a sociological perspective and so to position myself on the border between *facts*, *fictions* and *fixations*.³

In 2006 I took part in a think-tank organized by Sarma in the framework of *B-Chronicles*. A key resource for my research on the Brussels dance community was the interview project for which choreographer Eleanor Bauer conducted some forty interviews.⁴ Together with boardgame-inventor Dimitry Masyn, I developed *PROJECT*, an interactive and participative 'community game' for 30 to 60 players in and around the Brussels dance community. Many voices in the present text, therefore, belong to the group of people around *B-Chronicles*. This text also bears traces of earlier research projects. From my research into the careers of contemporary dancers in Brussels,⁵ I have borrowed labour- and art-sociological insights, as well as what I learned about how the dance sector functions in Flanders and Brussels. Other parts owe much to my current research into international (labour) migration and its consequences on the daily life and culture of migrants and their families.

¹ For more information on *B-Chronicles* and Sarma, see: www.b-kronieken.be, www.sarma.be

² See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991.

³ In its short history, sociology has repeatedly tried to formulate a new response to the question of the meaning of *community*. That this has not yet led to a unanimous answer is largely due to irreconcilable notions of what 'the social reality' consists of and in what way we should then study it. This has its advantages. Sociology's diverse and co-existing subdisciplines all look at the world through a different lens, which gives us the opportunity to play with a range of perspectives in order to study the *community*. I have chosen not to limit myself to the viewpoint of one sociological branch, but to make use of various concepts and metaphors as building blocks to reconstruct the so-called *Brussels dance community*.

⁴ Further information on the issues and methodological approach of this interview project is available on www.b-kronieken.be, where one can also find a report on the interviews in the form of summaries, audio-excerpts, keywords, and 'mappings'. For 2007 we are planning a more in-depth analysis of the interviews.

⁵ Delphine Hesters, *De choreografie van de danscarrière. Kwalitatief onderzoek naar de carrières van hedendaagse dansers in de Vlaams-Brusselse context*, MA thesis, KULeuven, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, 2004.

My reading of the Brussels dance community will rest on three somewhat naive-sounding questions which came to the fore in the conversations with the B-Chroniclers, and which attempt to question the common assumptions around *the Brussels dance community*.

1. If one of the most frequently cited features of the dance community is that it is *international*, then why do we call it the *Brussels* dance community?
2. If we never talk about a 'bakers's community' or a 'theatre community', then why do we talk about a *dance community*?
3. If the idea of a *dance community* seems so obvious, then why is it that those people who most seem to belong to it claim its existence the least?

I. On the folds between the transnational and the local in the dance community

If one of the most frequently cited features of the dance community is that it is international, then why do we call it the Brussels dance community?

On the international, transnational and local

Let's start at the beginning. When commentators of the Brussels dance scene use the term *international*, they usually do so in an everyday sense: the Brussels dance scene is international, because many dancers working in the city come 'from elsewhere', from abroad. Furthermore, *a lot* of them come from abroad and they mostly come from many *different foreign countries*. Ever since globalization has become a central research theme in the social sciences (among others), the related concept apparatus has been broadened and *international* now generally has a different and more specific meaning: it only designates the relations between nation states ('inter-nations'). For all other exchanges of capital, ideas, discussions, people, digits, etc. flowing across national boundaries and in which individuals, organizations or institutions are active – thus, everything except those states –, one now commonly uses the term *transnational* (not only in academic literature, for that matter, but also in essays written in, and on, the dance world, for instance). However, *transnational* risks becoming just as meaningless as *international* in everyday usage – as long as there borders and these can be crossed, then one is satisfied. Unlike in the work of Ulf Hannerz,⁶ for instance, who uses this vague and rather general definition, *transnational* is generally defined more narrowly in research on (human) migration as the long-term processes whereby migrants establish and maintain relations with relatives in both their country of origin and in their land of residence. Whereas the figure of the migrant used to stand for the uprooted (*déraciné*), multimedia applications and cheap transportation by air or by bus have ushered in the birth of the connected migrant:⁷ a man or woman who, besides the new relationships, manages to keep up the old ties.⁸ Alejandro Portes calls such long-term transnational phenomena "globalisation from below." They do not 'soar' to a higher level like the international, but remain fundamentally anchored in the local 'at grassroots level'. Contemporary means of communication allow the traditional notion of community, with its accent on origin, roots and

⁶ See Hannerz's standard work from 1996: *Transnational Connections. Culture, People, Places* (London/New York: Routledge).

⁷ I am borrowing this concept from Dana Diminescu whose research is partly on the use of media among migrants.

⁸ One example of a transnational phenomenon within this framework is the active participation of the Turkish communities of Western Europe in Turkish politics, whereby the migrants not only go to the ballot box during the elections, but also campaign in Great Britain, the Netherlands or Germany and, through structural lobbying, even have an influence on the setting of the agenda in the Turkish political arena. See Eva Ostergaard-Nielsen's work on transnational politics.

continuity, to live on in a new constellation, even if migration has unsettled the expectation of an unambiguous geographical location.

With this conceptualisation in mind, it no longer seems obvious to define the dance community as a transnational community of migrants. It is, rather, the result of labour migration, but its roots are lacking. The dance community is an international group of people sharing a certain form of belonging, but one which has been constructed. It is in this construction that the original roots of the individuals have been *retouched*, and it is only the fact that they come 'from elsewhere' which is still explicitly in the picture. The dance community thus rather resembles a settled swarm of swallows which came together from different directions and is not the result of a diaspora from one specific place. The dominant movement is centripetal and not centrifugal.

And yet. Because contemporary research on migration inside Europe is primarily focused on the former guest workers from North Africa and Turkey and the more recent influx of Eastern Europeans, ethnicity has unnecessarily been brought to the fore in studies on transnational communities. The communities being studied thus acquire a somewhat restricted and even static character, even though their roots lie in migration, in mobility. In my opinion, however, there is no pressing reason why the (ethnic) origin should be included in the definition of such transnational phenomena. Nowadays, the term *community* has lost its exclusive claim to tradition and 'natural relations' and can also refer to new social constellations in which people play roles which they have acquired themselves and which they were not necessarily born into or raised up in, whether through status or class.⁹ The dance community is a community of relations which are first entered into on the grounds of the roles which members fulfil within the artistic world of dance and for which one usually has to fight hard.

It is not the mobility itself which is transnational, but the ensuing social phenomena. The emergence of well-worn paths within the dance world, where connections are constantly being actualized and which start to draw clear patterns, points to a lasting social phenomenon which is no longer dependent on individual movements. The fact that artists always manage during their global travels along artistic stations to find cheap accommodation with an acquaintance (of an acquaintance of ...), or that Brussels and Berlin now only seem to be a stone's throw away from one another, points to a transnational community (or communities) in the dance world.

This brings us back to the original question: whether in times of transnational communities, it is legitimate to claim the existence of a *Brussels* dance community.

The gravitational force of a sector

If we follow my observations and interpretations, then there is good reason to talk of something like a *Brussels* dance community.¹⁰ The network of contemporary dance that stretches 'around the world' is in some places more tightly woven and more solidly anchored in a local setting. Some cities clearly function as magnetic fields which can attract migratory birds and which frequently function as a base of operations for repeated flights. To give a few well-known examples, New York is or was such a place, just as Brussels and Berlin are today. The most obvious explanation for this phenomenon is the gravitational force or appeal of an existing artistic climate in these cities.

Hannerz mentions them as a distinct social group which plays an important role in

⁹ Following the classic distinction between *ascribed* and *achieved* positions or roles (borrowed from Linton).

¹⁰ This first part is written from an external macro-perspective. In the third part I will be working from the inside of the same reality and with a view from below. So I will be able to throw different light to the same phenomena and to construct a very different story.

the dynamics of world cities: the "expressivist specialists" who – usually at a young age – move to the cities, as if they were on a pilgrimage, in order to enjoy the unique opportunities of inspiration and self-development, or simply "to be in the right place". It is probably no coincidence that Brussels is frequently called the Mecca of the dance world. "*If you make it in Brussels you are a dancer,*" is something I heard in a number of interviews with foreign dancers based in Brussels.¹¹ During these conversations I noticed that the initial attraction is still being strongly determined by the names of Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker/Rosas, Wim Vandekeybus/Ultima Vez, Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods and Alain Platel/LesBallets C de la B. The first acquaintance with 'Flemish dance' often occurs by watching videos or attending performances during international tours. Since the mid-1990s, there has also been the school P.A.R.T.S. The more enmeshed within the dance world, the more one is gradually taken up by the *buzz* around Brussels as the place to be and the more the big names fade into the background and the Brussels *scene* as a whole takes over.

Whether we are dealing with the Turkish diaspora or with dancers on the road – from a specific key moment onward, migration engenders migration and the network fulfils its role as facilitator. This is not to say, however, that the ball will just start rolling by itself because someone has given it a kick at random. This Brussels could not have been located just anywhere. The 'Flemish wave' of the 1980s may have been the mythical kickoff, but the tidal wave which it started cannot be explained on the grounds of an artistic climate alone. In order to understand this, we need better insight into the structural embedding.

Brussels, and Flanders by extension, is one of the rare places in the world where a dancer or choreographer can cherish the illusion that it is possible to make a living out of art and art alone. "*You are actually an employee. Actually, your job is real, not just likesome arty farty hobby that you do on the side, that nobody expects you to live from.*"

This has a lot, if not everything, to do with the fact that Flanders subsidizes contemporary dance and that there are numerous structures which help with production and performance. The sector of the stage arts does in fact rely for the most part on government support, whether directly or indirectly through coproductions and buy-out amounts. Moreover – and this is remarkable – the Flemish Community also subsidizes non-Flemish artists. Some examples: in 2001 and 2002, 8 out of the 12 artists to have received project subsidies were foreigners, and in 2003, 11 out of 13 were foreigners. Among those to benefit from structural subsidies are the American Meg Stuart and the Swiss Thomas Hauert (it should also be noticed that the structures and entourage surrounding these foreign artists are Flemish). However, the warning given to Damaged Goods during the last round of subsidies, when funding was for a two-year period and not a four-year period, was a clear sign that this openness also has its (national) limits. Now that, in the opinion of the Minister of culture, Meg Stuart risks losing her Brussels or Flemish label because of her residencies in Zürich and Berlin, enthusiasm for her contribution to 'our' contemporary dance is cooling. The government supports an international community in Flanders, not the transnational one.

A somewhat less frequently discussed but certainly no less important factor which brings some relief to the artistic scene is the safety net for artists which is built into the Belgian social security system, ensuring that dancers with acquired rights can receive unemployment benefits in times of unemployment. Not only is a hard-earned status a strong incentive to choose Brussels as a base of operations, but the unemployment benefits also contribute to the sector – we could just as well consider them as additional federal subsidies for Flemish art. It often happens that no salaries are paid for periods during the creation of a show, and that one decides to fall back on an allowance. Thanks to these allowances, choreographers who are starting out can take the time to prove themselves before having to ask the Flemish authorities for subsidies. Dancers can also prolong periods of inactivity so

¹¹ Various quotes in italics below are taken from the interviews which were part of my MA thesis research into the careers of contemporary dancers in the Brussels context.

that a production can have a longer life.

On top of that, for the on-average not-so-well-off stage artist, Brussels is also quite simply a relatively inexpensive (capital) city – this point also seems crucial for the bloom of the Berlin scene – and the city is also at the junction of busy routes between important European cities. In a transnational community, Brussels is in this sense also a suitable place *to be based* – it offers not only an artistic base, but also a practical base of operations.

The structural, financial and political logics in which dance functions as a subsidized stage-arts sector provide the boundary-crossing dance world with clear magnetic fields which are primarily determined by geographical location. The Brussels component of the Brussels dance community can be interpreted in this sense.

On guest workers and non-existent responsibilities

In the above I called the members of the dance community *migrants*, but this label is not quite appropriate, however. Dancers are in fact *guest workers*: their mobility is driven by job opportunities and their stay is initially temporary. Even those who appear to be migrants after the fact, with a permanent stay in Brussels, did not generally plan it like that in advance. This distinction is not as insignificant as it may seem. Because they only expect to stay temporarily, dancers invest very little in a broader embedding in the diverse social circles in their city of residence. Their geographical world may be very broad, but their social one is not necessarily so. Understandably too, since ideally a guest worker is always ready to pack his bags and go where the job will take him, without looking back. Flexibility is their motto, and integration is not an issue. As a result, some of them come to the bewildering conclusion that they have been in Brussels for ten years already, but still consider themselves to be on the road and, for instance, have no idea of what makes the headlines in Belgian newspapers.

However, guest workers are always invested in in an ambiguous manner. Welcomed because of the 'surplus value' which they can bring – in this case, to the development of the Flemish international dance – the present work context is steered as much as possible in the right direction, but no one is willing to take responsibility for the uncertain future. It is remarkable how little discussion there is, not only in Brussels but in the very broad residence of the transnational dance community, on the issue of a career in dance, as well as on the consequences of job-hopping in a system where freelancing is the rule, and on the issue of the end of one's career which in dance, and in contemporary dance too, generally comes quite early. In 2005, the Flemish Theatre Institute (Vlaams Theaterinstituut, or VTi) organized an enquiry into and a conference on careers and career perspectives. In the end, however, only actors and directors from theatre were on the agenda. Raising this theme within dance could well mean opening Pandora's box. In effect, the dance world is caught up like no other in the 'anachronism' of globalization: individuals act at an international level on the transnational artistic scene, but in their concrete, everyday lives, they each time have to land in a modern world which is run by nation states which, though not quite sovereign, still spell out the rules with which citizens and non-citizens within their territory need to comply. Border-crossing thus also means a transition from one system to another, without any guarantees of continuity or understanding. Belgian law does not recognize Spaniards or Australians, only Belgians and non-Belgians as well as, for the past few decades, Europeans and non-Europeans. In practice, this situation means that dancers who today are paying taxes and social security in Belgium will get nothing back in Germany tomorrow, or that six years spent working in Portugal will not necessarily be recognized as six years worth of experience in a Belgian contract, which, in the long run, is harmful to the prospect of a minimal comfort of living. Whoever is aware of this situation can, however, often allow himself some measure of *self-deceit* and try to live in the here and now. *"It is something that I think about often. But on the other side, there is*

something I want to do and that is keep on dancing, whatever it takes, for the moment. What I don't want to do is start thinking about it and come to the conclusion that I should stop." It seems that the younger one is, the less one worries about it. The older one gets, the more one feels the consequences of this carelessness.

The issue is one of as yet non-existent responsibilities. Saskia Sassen has shown how processes of economic globalization and denationalization create gaps in the framing of new realities and practices, but also how specific organizations and institutions take up the challenge and fill the spaces left empty by this legal void – not with national laws, but with institutionalized norms dictated by non-territorial structures of authority. In the course of the last twenty years, for instance, international trade arbitration has grown into the leading contractual method for the solving of boundary-crossing business disputes.¹² New realities require new answers and new responsibilities.

For the prototype of the highly qualified and well-earning expats such as engineers, lawyers, financial experts and researchers, the market has devised its own solutions: either their employer guarantees complete legal and financial backing and employees move within a single company from New York to New Delhi and thus change location at most. Or they can rely on a transnational circuit of intermediaries specializing as 'international temping-agencies', a circuit which thrives on the wwweb, its natural, boundless habitat.¹³ These agencies study the legislation and legal procedures of migration, negotiate with immigration authorities and potential employers, and guarantee job security and the transferability of qualifications. Moreover, they often also act as an 'assimilation office' for the *expat world*, ensuring its clients that they will be able to immerse themselves safely in the culture and will not be forced into *cosmopolitanism*, but that they will be able to keep their status of *metropolitan locals*.

Vertovec quotes Iredale's description of the IT sector, which could easily be taken for a portrayal of the dance world-as-job-market: "The following characteristics prevail within the industry: it is highly fluid in terms of skill requirements; international and with little impact of particular cultural contexts; dominated by English language as the basis; on-the-job experience as the most important means of acquiring human capital or becoming multiskilled; a high level of intra- and inter-company and inter-region/country mobility; potential for return migration and investment, and a profession that is largely unregulated by unions or other mechanisms."

A bit further on, however, he adds that the recent proliferation in international work intermediaries proves that such job markets for the highly qualified cannot exist without massive investments in (formal) networks.¹⁴ The job market for dance, however, does seem to exist without these 'massive investments' and proves itself to be the unlucky exception to this rule. The logic of the capitalist market does not apply to this primarily subsidized circuit where there are no guarantees of profit, and no one is willing to fill in the gaps on the transnational job market of supply and demand regulations. The most important actors in the local sectors are subsidized institutions and national or regional authorities which, by definition, lose their negotiating power outside their national or regional boundaries. As a result, within this hyperflexible transnational job market, individual dancers themselves have to run their *boundaryless career*¹⁵ like small companies, and that is where things so often go

¹² Saskia Sassen, *Globalisering. Over mobiliteit van geld, mensen en informatie*, Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1999.

¹³ This is an invitation for you to google: type in 'expats' and you will see what I mean.

¹⁴ Steven Vertovec, 'Transnational Networks and Skilled Labour Migration. Working paper 02-02 of the ESRC Research Programme on Transnational Communities', 2002, <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/>

¹⁵ In a 'boundaryless career', an employee moves from one project to the next, thus each time contributing his acquired knowledge and experience while also developing them further. This career profile contrasts with the type of the classic or organizational career, which develops entirely within a single organization. With this evolution from the classic to the boundaryless career, responsibility for the career has shifted from the organization to the individual. See Arthur & Rousseau, 1996. *The Boundaryless Career. A New Employment*

so wrong. Though each government may well have spelt out living and working conditions, not everyone masters the language of the country or knows his way through the legal jargon. In Brussels especially, the administrative jungle seems to be very dense and inhospitable. The complexity of the heavy legal and labour systems silences the dancers who have to wrestle their way through it, and as a result, the temporariness of their stay and the quick pace of mobility are soon called on as excuses to close one's eyes again. "I wonder sometimes how people would know how long I have been in different places. Generally I go outside the EU every three months anyway, so it is ok. It is really... I don't know, if anyone decided to check up my record, I don't know how that would go and whether I was doing it right or not."

This hot potato has been on the table for quite some time already and someone is going to have to eat it. Who that might be has not yet been determined, and that is precisely why it is so important for actors in the dance sector itself to stand up and take on the responsibility of taking an initiative, since no one else is going to be spelling things out. In this fold between the transnational and the national, creative solutions need to come from below.

From cosmos to backroom

Nasr Hafez¹⁶ calls the transnational community of highly mobile dancers the *cosmoproletariat*: proletarians who contribute their body as capital and rent it out for a living, project by project, in ever-changing work constellations. Not only does the connotation of bodily labour make this a striking metaphor, but it also reveals the low levels of income in dance. Despite government wishes to keep artists out of financial marginality with their policies on arts and artists, more subsidies do not necessarily mean increased levels of income for individual dancers. More subsidies mean that one can pay for more hours of artistic work, but because of the lack of formal barriers¹⁷ and the fragmentation of company structures, the result is not that the artists are less poor, but that there are more poor artists. The number of candidates adapts itself to the means available, as Hans Abbing¹⁸ informs us. Many foreign dancers who are attracted by stories about the dance land of milk and honey are, in other words, being somewhat cheated as regards the financial reality.

Compared to Marx and Engels's factory workers-proletarians, however, this *cosmoproletariat* has significantly more glamour. As Hafez says: "they may worry if they will be able to pay next month's rent, but it does not prevent them from being dressed in the latest fashion trends. (...) Their G4's are equipped with the latest software, their iPods offer the apt soundtracks to their neo-bohemian existence." In his book *Verhoog over verzet*, Dieter Lesage¹⁹ distinguishes between the *globeoisie* of the transnational (economic) elite and the *digitariat* which is defined as the class which owns little more than a computer and an internet connection. Both groups find themselves, however, in the glamourization of cosmopolitanism, "seen as the naive, since selective, glamourization of the dazzling city life."²⁰ That the

Principle for a New Organisational Era. Oxford : Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ Nasr Hafez, 'Welcome to the cosmoproletariat', *Janus* n° 21 (December 2006). Hafez wrote this text in the framework of *B-Chronicles*. It is also available on www.b-kronieken.be.

¹⁷ Unlike in many other jobs or professions, there are no strict professional barriers such as degrees, for instance, in the field of dance. Whoever believes himself to be an artist can have a shot at it. The final selections only take place on the job market itself.

¹⁸ Hans Abbing, *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002.

¹⁹ Dieter Lesage, *Verhoog over verzet. Politiek in tijden van globalisering*, Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2004.

²⁰ I am here following this definition of cosmopolitanism for argument's sake, even though I prefer Hannerz's version (1996). He considers *cosmopolitanism* to be an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It includes an intellectual and esthetic openness to different cultural experiences and represents a search for contrasts rather than uniformity. What Lesage is here describing is thus '*metropolitanism*' rather than a

digitariat is wanting in defining power does not seem to bother it – as long as it can take part in the life style of the elite and can share in the glamorous aura of the simili-exclusive opportunities of big-city night-life. However, euphoria and despair are often found on either side, respectively, of the restaurant kitchen's swing doors, according to Lesage. Besides cultural cosmopolitans, big cities also always attract desperate and/or hopeful as well as legal and/or illegal people looking for work. But even within this scheme of things, dancers refuse to simply let themselves be caught in a single conceptual trap. They seem to play quite easily with the rules of the system of which they are themselves the victims. Dancers play along like highly qualified expats in the regions of the privileged professionals whose salaries increase significantly and quickly, but they lack the big money since, within their subsidized stage-arts sector, they fall completely *à côté de la plaque capitaliste*. As a result, they are just like impotent digitarians who, true enough, also control the theatre of the dazzling city. However, the speed and 'ease' with which the positions on either side of the above swing doors can sometimes be reversed generate in some dancers both frustration and existential anxiety which should not be underestimated. Trying to strike a balance between being alert and present on the one hand and shutting one's eyes on time on the other is very dangerous.

II. The dance world as greedy institution, or voluntary condemnation to one another

If we never talk about a 'bakers's community' or a 'theatre community', then why do we talk about a 'dance community'?

As Durkheim wrote in his 1893 classic *De la division du travail social*, a forced division of labour leads to organic solidarity and lasting dependence. Organic solidarity is grounded in collaboration and pluralism – each individual in the social body has his own speciality and contributes a unique contribution to the whole, whereby everyone becomes dependent on everyone and a *community* can exist which is more than the sum total of its individuals. This societal principle, as Durkheim formulated it on an abstract *macro*-level, is equally valid at a *meso*-level within organizations and institutions.

What Durkheim's thesis already anticipated at the end of the 19th century – when *community* (*Gemeinschaft*) still stood mainly for the natural, unquestioned 'warm' bonds of shared traditions which in the modern era risked becoming eroded through the rise of the 'cold', mechanical structures of mass society (*Gesellschaft*)²¹ – is that a community can emerge on the basis of cooperation and thus through *action* and *communication*. Community can thus be a more or less deliberate construction and is – within this mode of reasoning – the product of 'practices' rather than 'structures' or 'cultures'.²²

The collective mental image of the *dance community* has been crystallized in and through the practices of the dance world. In other words, what takes place in theatre halls, studios, workshops, foyers and cafés must have such power that a collectivity or a source of *belonging* emerges in these daily practices, which is so strong that it is presented as being so primary that it can be called a *community*. No other professional or artistic sector has managed to develop the image of a community. So what makes the contemporary dance world so special?

In what follows, I shall argue that the dance world shows itself to be a *greedy institution* and that this forms the *façon d'être* of the *dance community*.

cosmopolitan orientation.

²¹ This classic distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* is ascribed to Tönnies. He considered them to be different expressions of social relations with accompanying social constellations. In the modern era, the dominance of *Gemeinschaft* ties would be shattered by those of the *Gesellschaft* type.

²² Gerard Delanty, *Community*, London: Routledge, 2003.

The mechanisms of absolute dedication

According to Simmel, modern man lives in numerous overlapping social sectors, but where the distinct sectors of 'sleeping', 'working' and 'playing' remain separate. Your relatives are neither your colleagues nor your friends; there is thus a functional differentiation at a micro-level. However, Coser has revealed the existence of organizations and groups in the modern world which make *total* demands on their members, which strive for exclusive and undivided loyalty, and which attempt to take over the member's personality in its totality: he calls them *greedy institutions*. Unlike Goffman's *total institutions*, their greedy equivalents draw up barriers between society and the institution itself, barriers which are not physical but symbolic and which rely on its members's voluntary submission. Classic examples of total institutions are prisons and institutes for the mentally deranged. Prototypical greedy institutions are monasteries and sects.²³ The following summary lists a combination of the elements – both structures and practices – which lead me to call the dance world *greedy*. Considering the way dance functions today, dancers voluntarily condemn themselves to each other.

1. Contemporary dance is heavily dependent on *government subsidies* and a network of work- and performance-spaces which because of that common source clearly reveal a clustering. This cluster of formally recognized structures and the life that blooms within it is what we usually call 'the sector'. There is therefore a clearly *localized circuit* which guarantees visibility, stimulates mutual positioning and thus generates important crossing points within the transnational field of dance.

2. However, the location and physical presence of the community's members come first of all from the collective, traditional character of the *performance arts*. Unlike the stereotypical visual artist, for instance, a stage artist never works alone and is thus always in direct contact with colleagues on the work floor. Moreover, the essence of the stage arts consists of *in-real-time-service* and thus requires the physical presence of actors or dancers in front of or among the audience, which is, again, often at least in part made up of actors and dancers. The 'product' of dance can only exist through the collective appearance of its members and so has to be re-actualized again and again. As regards both production and presentation, dance, just like theatre, is a social, 'communal' enterprise.

3. The physical presence of fellow dancers involves a lot more than just being in each others presence - watching and listening to one another face to face. Both in the studio and on stage, this physical presence also involves *bodily contact* and thus feeling and smelling one another. Whoever works with his body touches on a human vulnerability which needs to be handled carefully with a delicate mix of respect and trust. Moreover, people who use their bodies in their profession can never lay down their 'tool' and work-related aspects also enter all aspects of their everyday lives.

4. One-hundred-percent involvement is the norm in the world of dance. Working with very few means often requires such an investment of time and effort that having and managing a hobby, a second job or a family becomes problematic. The random sequence of various jobs and the practice of residencies in more or less distant places make investing in long-term engagements outside dance problematic. In the larger companies with, relatively speaking, more comfort and where time and space are more clearly defined (or can be), it is the long tours abroad which take up the life of the dancer around the clock.

²³Lewis A. Coser, *Gulzige instituties. Patronen van absolute toewijding*, Van Loghum Slaterus, 1978.

5. The harder the break-up of company structures, the more important becomes the regulating function of personal contacts.²⁴ In a *freelance* sector where the creation of job opportunities is a never-ending process, maintaining a personal *network* is of crucial importance. As indicated above, job opportunities are not distributed through agencies, but information travels quickly from one individual to another – by word of mouth or via voice mail and mail boxes. Whoever is looking for work needs to be both present and visible. This form of networking is certainly not always intentional, but that does not make it any less functional and it is, from an organizational point of view, particularly effective in a sector with little money and (thus) little time: each project requires a new team, which, without the pre-existing connections in the network, would be an expensive and laborious affair.

6. Together with the above, it is especially the international nature of the dance community which ensures the tight bonds between members (and distinguishes it from the theatre world). For *guest workers*, social networks of relatives are not only crucial for finding work and accommodation, but also for the social and psychological support in their particular situation.²⁵ The foreign members of the Brussels dance community came to the city for the sake of dance. At first, a layer of work relations is formed, which then forms the basis for a layer of friendly and intimate relations. In turn, this circle of primary relations determines the following circle, whereby an expanding circle of relations takes shape between dance and art relatives.

Greedy institutions put pressure on individuals to loosen their ties with other institutions or with people whose claims are in conflict with their own, or even to give up entirely all relations with such institutions or people. Greedy institutions focus the devotion of their members on a single, total status and the main role relations which are related to it. Thus, a total status is created around the role of 'dancer' and the web of relations surrounding it. Anna Aalten hits the nail on the head when she says: "Dancing is not something you do. Dancers are not people who dance, dancers are dancers."²⁶ Sleeping, working and playing often take place within a single social circle – colleagues are friends are lovers. When dancers go 'home' or have some 'time off', they often land in other regions of the same dance world. It is as if only having a family or having children can break the kaleidoscope of dance.

The dance world is, strictly speaking, not an 'institution' and does not have a central intelligence which aims at isolating members, as in a sect. The greediness of the dance world is not an aim in itself, but it is a *consequence* of the above circumstances. Dancers are stuck in a thin but greedy, transnational layer of the *metropolitan cultural scene* which creates a near-physical disconnection of the community from the rest of society, but one which they enter into eagerly.

"And you isolate yourself from the world. Sometimes I have this feeling that one day I'll wake up and I'll be eighty and I'll realise that I missed the whole real reality of life. I am living in this world which is so different from other people... and I don't know which one is more real. I don't know what is real and what is not... it is like The Matrix."

Once one is encapsulated in this layer, one enters an autopoietic system of *recognition* which repeatedly confirms and reinforces reciprocal solidarity. The question of *recognition* is an existential claim which none of us ignore and which makes of us all social animals, and is thus not particular to dancers or artists. What is particular is the tendency to create a *total*

²⁴ Pierre-Michel Menger, *La profession de comédien. Formations, activités et carrières dans la démultiplication de soi*, Paris: Ministère de la culture et de la communication, DAG, Département des études et de la prospective, 1997.

²⁵ Vertovec – see also above.

²⁶ Anna Aalten, *De bovenbenen van Olga de Haas. Achter de schermen van de Nederlandse balletwereld*, Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 2002. The world of classical ballet does indeed have its own specificities which are different from those of contemporary dance. The meaning of this sentence is thus somewhat modified, but it is still telling.

status within greedy institutions, whereby the striving for recognition becomes quite risky – a matter of all or nothing – and where emotional dependency can become very strong. Moreover, this also applies *a fortiori* within the arts today. In contemporary arts, degrees and other formal symbols do not suffice to be able to claim artistic identity and one is forced into continuous action and interaction within the artistic community to get confirmation that you and your work 'matter'. These mechanisms form a strong potential basis for the *pursuit* of a *sense of belonging* which in itself then becomes constitutive of the tightening of the *community* within a shared environment.

III. The fixions and paradoxes of the dance community

If the idea of a dance community seems so obvious, then why is it that those people who most seem to belong to it claim its existence the least?

So far I have merely confirmed the existence of the *Brussels dance community* – I have played the devil's advocate and raised questions, but I have always started out from the reality of the community: "one talks about it, therefore it exists". There can be no *facts* without *fictions*, however, and what is more: *facts* create *fictions* which create *facts*. One of the aims of the *B-Chronicles* interviews was that, together with the interviewees, Eleanor Bauer would go beyond the vague statements and unproblematic everyday language and would look for the (im)possibility of more telling definitions. "*Do you consider yourself a part of a community?*", "*What community?*", "*Do you consider yourself a part of a dance community?*", "*Who else is in that community?*", "*What makes it a community?*", "*What do you share/what brings you together?*", "*When, where, and how do you feel a sense of belonging?*", "*When, where and how did you recently feel alone?*", "*Does Brussels feel like home? Does anywhere feel like home? What is the longest period you have stayed in an apartment since your first job?*"²⁷ With this type of questions, we can go deeper into the Brussels dance community and explore it from the inside instead of making observations from a distant point of view. The first and most important claim which we can make thanks to this change of perspective is that the 'members' of the *Brussels dance community* do not simply claim its existence. There is talk of something like a *dance sector*, a *dance field* or a *dance world* which is populated by people – and they are often referred to in conversation – but questions on the existence of and belonging to the *dance community* all receive very ambiguous answers. In what follows I wish to show that this ambiguity goes back to a number of 'classic' connotations of the concept of *community*, with which the so-called dance community cannot be associated.

A community of communities – on borders and identity

Community is essentially a matter of inclusion and exclusion, and thus of *belonging* and *border work* – this time in a figurative sense. In mainstream classic sociology, but also in society in general, the concept of community is associated with tradition and inclusion is a matter of creating *homogeneous* groups. The primary *community* is thus the community into which we are born and which can be defined by such categories as ethnicity and nationality, which are not easily achievable, if at all, to outsiders. New realities, however, such as the increased mobility of individuals in our modern society (see also 'globalization') are creating openings for new forms of community.

Outlining a non-traditional community built on practices and various forms of communication is, however, an impossible task. Community borders are indeed very flexible,

²⁷²⁷. You can find an expanded list of questions on www.b-kronieken.be, in the research section.

since less weighed down by the past, and can constantly be redefined on the grounds of changing practices and composition. "Communication communities are not shaped only by relations between insiders and outsiders, but by expansion in the community of reference and the construction of discourses of meaning. Thus rather than being sustained by symbolic boundaries and a stable community of reference, communication communities are open horizons," according to Delanty.²⁸ It is difficult to explain that you belong somewhere if you do not quite know where exactly you should belong. The bewildering result of this is that almost all of the dancers which were interviewed feel that they do not belong to 'the centre' and thus would position themselves in the margins.

This leads to the emergence of two contradictory movements of *expansion* and *contraction*, which put at risk the idea of *the dance community* as a single entity.

If we wish to capture the dance community as an artistic community in its broadest sense and make a complete list of all circles in which members's *belongings* and affinities take shape, then, besides dancers and choreographers, we also get: programmers, musicians, directors, composers, film directors, writers, theoreticians, critics, graphic designers, etc. The diversity of practices gathered roughly under the 'contemporary dance' heading results in a multidimensional and expanding sequence of overlapping circles of which no overview is possible. In this sense, the dance world has at most an imaginary centre around the construct of 'contemporary dance' but especially undefined margins. Because of the impossibility of describing the whole, each member creates his own little sub-dance community with which he or she associates. Focus is thus on the multiplicity of individuals rather than on the community as an entity. The so-called *dance community* thus consists primarily of diverse sub- or mini-communities, bubbles of affinities and relations which together form a head of foam.²⁹

The conclusion to all this is that a *communication-based community* always takes the form of a *network*. Networks do not have borders, nor, as a result, do they have either a centre or margins, and they consist of a multiplicity of individual points which are interconnected through communication paths.

A second reason why interviewees seemed unwilling to claim the existence of 'the Dance Community' – in the singular and in capital letters – is a fear of *identity closure*. To recognize one's belonging to a certain community is the same as putting forward and also essentializing a number of features which from then on fixate our identity. "The problem with community is that it places too much weight on identity," claims Delanty.³⁰ For contemporary dancers suffering from a mild form of schizophrenia brought on by the need for flexibility, this is indeed a problem. To be locked up discursively as a mobile dancer/ choreographer/ video artist/ essayist in a *Brussels dance community* can seem terribly oppressing and can jeopardize future opportunities for other aspects of one's identity.

A community of foreigners – home versus/and on the road

The term *community* not only evokes associations with tradition but also with *roots* and the land in which they are anchored. *Belonging* means putting down roots somewhere, feeling at home somewhere. Also, *belonging* is always a *longing for*.

However, Brussels does not evoke these associations for the (foreign) dancers who told us their stories. Brussels is first of all a practical residence and crossing point, a social-political environment where opportunities can be created for artists and a city which lies at the junction of interesting artistic and geographical routes. Brussels is a city where one can reside

²⁸ Delanty – see also above.

²⁹ I am here borrowing some images from the B-chronicles interviews.

³⁰ Gerard Delanty – see also above.

without having to stop being on the road: a residency. One can feel welcome without having to feel at home. This is the ambiguous side of the city which fits the realities and illusions of being a guest worker: everyone belongs in Brussels because everyone is a foreigner. *"I don't feel at home in Brussels, but more than in any other place."*

Brussels is a good mistress, a here-and-now affair, without making any promises but with a tinge of nostalgia for a place one can no longer return to, even if it is apparently within reach. Mistresses rarely become good spouses for their loved ones.

Changing the significance of a place is particularly difficult and requires a lot of time and symbolic work. Because of the initial short-lived nature of the dancers's stay, they have built up a transparent but solid wall of involved remoteness which ensures that they can become engaged in the here-and-now but that they can also leave without too much rending of clothes. This wall can only be broken down by a small earthquake (such as having children) or will wear down over the years, when the mobile existence starts to weigh down on them and when flexibility and openness are not necessarily a virtue any longer. But even then, *home* remains for many the place and primary community one comes from and which one still holds onto as an option for 'later'.

A community of the eternal present – continuity versus fragmentation

If the Brussels dance community exists, then it exists in an eternal present. Because of the ephemeral nature of this art form and the great mobility of its members, its make-up changes with each actualization and it only has a short-term memory. Today's community is not the same as tomorrow's. This perpetual-present is at right angles to another classic connotation of community: the guarantee of *continuity* and the connectedness of past, present and future. Today's dance community after all has neither a past nor a future. The bonds which are forged are intense (see 'greedy institutions') but perhaps more fleeting than one might wish. *"There is very strong affective links, it is very difficult when someone or a group of people leave. That is very hard. Because you loose... it is like you are a bit amputated somehow. I mean after, you recover, but you feel a bit amputated. Because you share a lot"* This explains why from an individual point of view the idea of a *community* is sometimes quite relative and is discussed with irony in interviews.

The series of 'sociological' photographs which we can take from a distance gives us a relatively stable picture: we can see a colourful gathering of individuals swarming along and through the cultural structures of Brussels. One can observe a high degree of mobility and ongoing exchanges with the other regions of the transnational community, but for those individuals who leave, there are others who arrive with similar characteristics and activities. Those on the inside, however, are required to be ready to give meaning to a new constellation with every push on the *refresh button*. On the one hand this guarantees adventure and ever-renewed impulses, a life on the edge. But on the other hand, they are forced to be on the alert and to keep the psychological and physical risks outside the danger zone. The vanishing point of rapidity and flexibility is dissolution.

IV. Community as a mode of productivity

Following my theses on communicative communities as networks and on the existence of numerous mini-communities and the indeterminacy of the broader one, we can ask ourselves whether it still makes sense to talk of *the dance community*. More recent sociological

conceptualisations of community seem to suit the so-called dance community of Brussels, but this does not take away from the fact that its so-called members find it hard identifying with it. And why should we hold on to the notion of community when the mechanisms of *identification* as well as those of *inclusion* and *exclusion* are being questioned from within? After all, without these, we are left with little more than a group of people with frequent interaction and less with a 'community'.

Maybe it would be better to conclude that in Brussels we find a *sector* of structures and organizations, which sector functions as residence for an ever-changing part of a *network* of individual dancers. Within that network there are clusters around 'strong individuals' who make identification possible with smaller circles which can be defined as small communities. They make it possible to position oneself within the network of contemporary dance, which shows itself to be more like a constellation in which the quality of the connections and the meaning and positions of the ties are more important than the quantitative parameters of a thinly-layered and uniform yet expansive net in which the weight and number of names in one's address book matter most of all. *Network* does not have to be a 'dirty' little word.

Having said this, the question regarding the emergence of *the dance community* as a notion becomes rather pressing. In conclusion, I would suggest a possible answer and an open end. *"I remember the last five or six years [second half of the 1990s, DH], that for the first time, there is really a 'dance community'. It is very young. When I first got here, there was the big companies and we were all in these companies. We never almost saw each other, we were always on tour. But we were the only dancers in the city. There werent really big training programs. There were some people doing small things, I don't say that, but in terms of what it is now, of people coming in, this kind of dance tourism, that exists here at the moment. In terms of all the students that leave and decide to stay and make their own work or work with somebody else... There is a really for the first time a dance community, in Belgium, in Brussels. "*

The number of dancers in Brussels, and especially of dance-makers, grew significantly in the 1990s. Various former members of the large companies stayed on in Brussels and started working either on their own or with others in smaller constellations. They were able to benefit from the recognition which contemporary dance had got in our country at the time. There were arts centres on hand looking for new names; there was the Flemish Community's arts budget; and there was something like an 'artistic climate' due to the artists (and arts) which were already present. With the exception of Thomas Hauert, no one has since then grown into a larger and lasting structure which we can call a *company*. Not only does it seem that the present subsidy system cannot guarantee a growth model, but it also seems that the aspirations of many choreographers and dancers lie elsewhere. During the 1990s the freelancers clearly outnumbered the dancers with longer term contracts in companies. This led to the emergence of a network of people who had already worked together or would work together and who need one another to create job opportunities. The only *dance community* – in the singular – which I would still speak of as such is a community based on the reciprocal recognition of potential 'colleagues': a *community as a mode of productivity*. It enables individuals to work in, with and even outside the established structures, individuals who find it difficult to adapt their hybrid work methods to the official and imposed categories.

Initiatives have recently been taken which deal *reflexively* with this idea of community as a means of 'self-organization'³¹ for artists. The clearest example is PAF (Performance Arts Forum)³² which wishes to profile itself as a non-institutional institute

³¹ This definition is used on the PAF website: a witty analogy with foreign 'self-organizations' – this time no longer immediately divided on the grounds of their migration background. 'Self-organization' stands in both groups for an emancipatory movement against colonizing powers.

³² www.pa-f.net Jan Ritsema, the inspiration behind PAF, has also written a text on artist residencies in the framework of *B-Chronicles*. See 'Portret van een dooie kip als kunstenaar', *Etcetera*, yr. 23 no. 104, December 2006, pp. 43-44.

functioning as a work platform for a community of artists. They can be interactively productive in a free environment, without this necessarily having to lead to a 'product': working without necessarily producing a *work (oeuvre)*. In other terms: working in art, but without making art. This is not just a question of 'artistic research' – as the above is also called more succinctly – but of seeking out various options so as not to have to enter into the existing and imposed structures. Both the members of PAF and of other emerging unions do not want to inherit what was built in the 1980s; rather, they wish to come up with organizational solutions for artistic work which presents itself today; on top of that, they do not wish to close off paths for what in the future will appear as new.

Nor is it a coincidence that it is precisely now that these *work places* are emerging as 'new' forms of organization with few regulations and which are essentially focused on supporting creation, development and reflection. In Brussels, places such as *Nadine* and *Les Bains* are well positioned on a circuit which is improvising with an *open source* model instead of with a circuit of closed studios and theatre houses.

If we turn back to the concepts and work on a more abstract level, we can see more clearly what this work mode means in practice for the dancers's working and living conditions: within the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*,³³ *Gemeinschaft* is again introduced on the side of *Gesellschaft*. The *community* enters on the production side, like an element that lies enclosed within the work area. The distinction between private and public life becomes vague. Community as a mode of productivity creates promising horizons for artistic production, but it is perhaps at precisely this moment that the *greedy institution* kicks into action.

³³ As already mentioned, this classic distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* is ascribed to Tönnies. He considered them to be different expressions of social relations with accompanying social constellations. The ideal-typical *Gemeinschaft* ties stand for warm, natural, traditional bonds. *Gesellschaft* bonds are cold, mechanical and constructed.