

## **Informal Artists NGO Networks**

### Reintroducing Mobility in the Region of South East Europe

#### **Background**

Mobility schemes for artists in South East Europe completely broken during the 1990s. The first regional meeting of artists and cultural operators to be organised following the war in the Balkans was held in Sarajevo in December 1999. Recognising the lack of funds and potential for local public support in all countries of the region, several informal networks of artists and cultural operators were created e.g. Balkan Artists Network (BAN) and the Balkan Association of Publishers (BAP) to enable cooperation, exchange/mobility. These networks were informally organised, as none of the Balkan countries offered a legal framework or possibility to create an international and/or regional NGO.

Beginning in 2001, some capacity building regional programmes were introduced to support cooperation between NGOs in the region by, for example, the European Cultural Foundation and the Soros Foundation i.e. the Kultura Nova programme engaging 14 NGOs from Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia. Some foreign cultural institutes such as Pro Helvetia, the Goethe Institute, etc. provided additional support for such cooperation which enabled a small number of recently established or re-established NGOs to expand their own mission to foster regional cooperation such as Mama (Zagreb), Remont (Belgrade), Walking Theory (Belgrade), etc. This support has been gradually withdrawn in recent years.

#### **How it works**

As there were no funds to support mobility and exchange as such, each of the cultural operators began to invite artists through the emerging informal networks, using already existing events and projects as a means to support mobility. At the beginning of 2000, the group of artists who met in Sarajevo travelled to Ohrid (host was the NGO Multimedia Skopje) and then to Labin (Croatia) hosted by Labin Art Express.

This kind of exchange continued throughout the decade, i.e. engaging artists in the work of important NGOs and using different local projects and programmes (grants for projects) to support the regional mobility of local artists. Conferences were very often organised as a pretext to bring artists from around the region to a certain town/environment where they could stay on after the meeting, usually in a friendly (home) atmosphere, to continue their artistic work in another setting.

Those artists who became mobile were not selected according to any clear or transparent criteria as there were no "mobility funds", public announcements or juries to select artists on the basis of a peer review. NGOs selected and sent artists based on previous and existing contacts. Artists accepted to live with a "hosting" family or in some "studio", without proper conditions and per diems.

#### **Results**

Although operating outside formal public structures and schemes, the informal artists NGO networks achieved quite a lot e.g. expanding regional partnerships, facilitating an exchange of know-how and creating real intercultural dialogue projects.

The networks have enlarged since 1999. We now are witnessing the participation of a "third generation" of artists and cultural operators in such networks which have expanded the field of cooperation and exchange activities; but still with no or low budgets to support their work.

The following provides examples of some of the main actors leading each "generation":

- *Generation I*: Centers for Contemporary Arts (Sarajevo, Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana, Skopje) which were originally established by Soros, Remont (Belgrade), Montenegro Mobil Arts (Podgorica), Multimedia (Skopje), Net Culture Club Mama (Zagreb), Pekarna (Maribor), etc.
- *Generation II*: Lokomotiva (Skopje), Youth Theatre (Mostar), Abrasevic (Mostar), Walking Theory (Belgrade), Stanica (Belgrade), Art Workshop Lazareti (Dubrovnik), Booksa (Zagreb), Kulturni front (Belgrade), etc.
- *Generation III*: Protok, (Banjaluka), Context Gallery (Belgrade), Molekula (Rijeka), Shadowcasters (Zagreb), etc.

Overtime, some of these actors disappeared, for example, the Soros Centre for Contemporary Arts Belgrade or Montenegro Mobil Art. Some of the leaders of these groups acquired public sector jobs following political changes in e.g. Serbia. However, the majority of the NGOs and networks they launched in the late 1990s are still relevant and even encourage and incorporate new members from the second or third generation. For example, the Association Clubture, which was funded in 2002 by first generation NGOs who started in 1990s, is today grouping together a wider network of NGOs throughout the region. New NGOs such as Shadowcasters created in 2006 are joining in.

The first generation of NGOs was composed of radical, political activists who expressed themselves through art and culture; who have been, at the same time, radically & explicitly anti-nationalistic. They organised international projects with the aim to bring "hated others" into the community, meaning to re-establish broken communication among ex-Yugoslav artists (here processes were more important than art projects as such).

The second generation was more "culturally" profiled. For example, Walking Theory produced the review TkH, organised high level academic studies and conferences and represented the Serbian and regional art scene at the Documenta XII in Kassel. Second generation contemporary dance NGOs such as Lokomotiva Skopje & Stanica Belgrade have been leading regional educational and research projects in the field of contemporary dance through the Nomad Dance Academy.

The third generation seems to balance the orientation of both previous generations; as witnessed in an exhibition held in Magacin Belgrade where 6 NGOs presented art works of young artists from the region who received a "mobility" prize - study trip to the USA (granted by ArtsLink). Political engagement remains very important, but more transparent criteria to select artists are applied. At the same time, a regional conference of independent cultural centres (summit of non-aligned centres for culture) was held in Magacin from the 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> June 2008, regrouping the representatives of all NGO's generations.

Public cultural institutions have been making an effort to re-create mobility programmes as they existed before the break-up of Yugoslavia. In this respect, an important project is "Student City" associated with the Alternative Film & Video Festival of the House of Culture in Belgrade which provides hosting for one film & video artist per year enabling him/her to make a film (the prize winner of previous festival). Within this scheme, in 2006-2007, Croatian artist, Tom Gotovac, created several experimental alternative films, linked to the Belgrade context, cultural memory and his previous film projects done in Belgrade in the 60s. It is an important example of intercultural dialogue recreated through arts and artistic practices. But, this event provoked a group of right wing youth activists to demonstrate against the final showing of the films including an attempt to stop the

film projector. The audience rejected their intervention and threw them out of the hall. The mobilization of right wing activism was also visible at several other occasions. Such tendencies reinforce the importance/necessity of providing support to mobility and intercultural projects; especially as a promoter of value changes. Such events have brought together human right activists and right wing activists – who do not communicate through political channels (official politics are labelling both as “extremists”).

The needs for artistic mobility and exchange are still very high. There are no publicly supported *art residencies* in the modern sense of the word (even “dachas” of artists associations have been closed).

The artist colonies which exist in the field of visual arts (160 colonies are supported by Ministry of Culture & around 500 by local communities) can not replace a more systemic approach which is needed not only for visual artists but also for artists working in other fields. Today, their main channel of support for mobility is through summer schools and educational workshops organized by civil society (such as the Nomad Dance Academy) or in public educational sector (such as the International Summer School of University of Arts in Belgrade).

The impact of the mobility projects and programmes generated through the civil society sector changed over time. From the first phase where accent was mostly placed on getting to know each other again, through experiencing partnership and difference through joint projects, the third phase is now characterized by capitalization of achieved results, raising the level of professionalism and mutual knowledge transfer, with specific emphasis on regional knowledge production. However, such forms of mobility are constrained, limited to specific art forms and linked, sometimes artificially, to other projects of different NGOs, projects for which funds could be found. In reality, mobility activities are still the most difficult part of the fundraising process, especially if they are not linked to seminars or conferences.

## Sources

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