

**PRECA  
RIOUS  
PRAC  
TICES**

Artists and cultural workers on the reality  
of precarious life

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# INTRODUCTION

Critical theorists have been shouting 'PRECARITY!' in the faces of anyone who would hear them for years. We know the story by now. Or, so we thought. As I am writing this text, the world is in Corona-lock-down. It is only now that we really feel what precarity is, more than an ever-looming feeling of being on the edge: once crisis sets in, the precarious are the first to be hit. Structures of social security are shaken and dissolve. What follows is economic free-fall.

The crisis also shows the ever so frustrating limitations of theory. Because it is altogether unclear how this general *understanding*, the acknowledgment of our position in terms of precarity, can be turned into a political tool of change. From this tension, some questions emerge that we find urgent: how can the (knowledge of) precarity be turned into an emancipatory force? How can it be determined when precarity is acceptable or even productive – and when it is not? How can the discourse of precarity help to do something about the reality of precarity?

This is where *Precarious Practices* comes into the picture. The essays

in this series are written by artists and art workers. They reflect on the precariousness of their own work and live. By refusing to speak of general theory, instead focusing on lived experience, *Precarious Practices* opens up the possibility to think about precarity in anew, from the situation of crisis. The various essays have different angles, but, ultimately, they all seek ways of being non-precarious, or at least less precarious together.

Sepp Eckenhausen, 23 April 2020

Over the past two years, the pandemic crisis dragged on. During this time, six texts by independent artists, researchers, detectorists and curators appeared in the series *Precarious Practices*. One of them talks about the labor market position of cultural workers, but the topics of the other texts range from lockdown life in collective studio buildings, caring for each other and the guilt of non-European artists to the endless stream of video calls we seem to be stuck in. They show that precarity is not a simple economic fact we can attribute to a labor market position, but a phenomenon that manifests in studios, cafes, kitchens and bedrooms.

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During the pandemic, existing social contradictions have become magnified and more visible. In the arts, everyone now knows, the self-employed have taken the hardest hit. Even the new coalition agreement mentions this as a point of attention. But in practice, structurally supporting the position of freelancers has proven difficult. Most of the national relieve funds have been paid out to institutions, while artists, curators and writers continue to struggle or move away from the arts.

What does the publication of this reader add to this ongoing discussion? Do these texts together answer the questions we asked ourselves in April 2020? Do we know how to use the discourse on precarity in the struggle against the reality of precarity? The series does not provide a grand vision for new policies. But by instead staying close to personal experience, the writers provide an insight into precarity as lived reality and its intertwining with the making, showing, sharing, contemplating of art. *Precarious Practices* is a reminder that countering precarity is a social task that is inextricably linked to art's forms of expression and right to exist.

Sepp Eckenhausen, 14 March 2022

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# BEFORE WE KNEW WHAT HIT US

HOW THE FANTASY OF THE AUTONOMOUS ARTIST STILL DOMINATES THE ART ACADEMY.

It's 2020. There's still this wonky idea, amongst those young enough to believe in it, that one goes through art education to experience freedom. It's a thought still put on display for the public during open days or graduation shows, too. And I understand the appeal of it. There should be a chance to suspend the flow of life, to not have to worry about the regular market demands that control so much of our everyday movements for at the very least four years. Four years of bliss! But does this idea of freedom hold up to the same scrutiny as it used to more than half a century ago when it was genuinely surfing the wave? What changed for students engaging in artistic education during the last few decades?

Let's say you did end up going through art education some decades back. And let's say you did so in The Netherlands, a country which rebuilt itself as a bit of a social utopia after the Second World War. You most likely didn't have to pay much, if anything, for your studies, and might have even gotten study grants to go along with it. And what happened once you finished your dedicated period of freedom? Between 1956 and 1987, you would have had the chance to fall under the Visual Artists Regulation (Beeldende Kunstenaars Regeling), which meant that you would receive an income from the Government in exchange for services or works of art. This regulation was preceded by the Contra-Performance Scheme (Contraprestatieregeling), 1949 – 1956, which was, in turn, the successor of the Work and Income for Artists Scheme (Wet Werk en Inkomen). Under any of these three schemes, you'd have experienced the advantages of your artist diploma offering you something akin to what we these days call a Basic Income for the first few years after your graduation.

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You'd have experienced less market pressure, less need to conform, so more room for experimentation and the bonus of governmental support.

2012, the year when I migrated from Romania to the Netherlands for study purposes, marked the moment when the tradition of the above-mentioned forms of support were entirely discontinued. What was left in their wake was a series of subsidies which functioned based on merit, following rules of market-driven competition. Boy, did I ever choose my arrival! Ironically, the tradition of financial protections was suspended by people who must have been well-aware of the fact that artists would be subjected to precarious living and working conditions without it. In a Parliamentary paper on the Work and Income Scheme from 1996, the following statement can be read:

“It is not easy for artists to provide for their livelihood throughout their career [...] The market for artists is difficult to compare with the market for industrial products. Often it concerns unique products or products with limited reproducibility. Moreover, the supply often surpasses demand. The individual character of art means that the artist must create his/her market. There is, in general, a market for art, but not for his/her art.”

Back to the twenty-first century. You graduated, or by some form of miracle managed to get your hands on a BA or MA or MFA. But art education alone can no longer make a career. Today, you jump from an apparent time of freedom straight into the clutches of the real world without any advanced preparation. And even if there is still some apparent support for artists, less than what there used to be, you have to jump through the fiery hoops of the market to get to it. At the same time, the appealing idea of the autonomous young artist still lingers on your mind. So you find yourself in a double bind. On the one hand, we, artists, are in a position of profound privilege of being able to be artists.

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On the other, all of our protections have been taken away, and we're told to go along with it. Meanwhile, our predecessors are dreaming of the good old days and sticking their fingers into their ears not to hear our disappointed cries.

Zoom into the Gerrit Rietveld Academy. The Rietveld is an art and design academy located in Amsterdam. Drop the name of the Rietveld Academy in a conversation, casually mention the fact that you own a diploma from it, and see faces change. It completely shifts the way you are perceived. The school has a very high-ranking reputation – especially among the locals. (Even if you've never set foot there, I highly recommend the social experiment of calling yourself an alumn. Purely for curiosity's sake.) The Rietveld is known for releasing hundreds of graduates into the world on a yearly basis, who go on to have a shot at the fields of visual art and design. In the past few decades, these graduates have increasingly been from other countries than the Netherlands. I am one of them.

It seems like a perfect premise for a great career, doesn't it? However, there seems to be an unspoken rule at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy not to offer the students any practical training in professional competences. This taboo is held in place to preserve a romantic notion of the artist as free, unhindered by reality, unburdened by economic pressures, la-di-dah – a set of ideas, by the way, that many students internalize with the greatest joy, because, hell yeah, they're free! The only form of professionalization present in the curriculum is the Future Market – a conglomeration of actual market stalls on which funding institutions, local residencies, loan providers, display their leaflets for one afternoon in the hallway of the main Rietveld building. The institution's representatives get to pitch their offers and answer questions, if any arise. There is no public debate associated with this setup and there is little public interest in engaging with it. All in all, the Future Market functions mostly as a quirky hallway decoration until it's folded back and packed away.

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If you happen to end up training as a visual artist at Rietveld, there's no in-depth talk of funding, residencies, or portfolio building. No talk of the ethics involved in making and distributing of artistic work or of training in financial literacy. As a result, many graduates end up perpetuating exploitation within the field and self-exploitation first and foremost. Think of students ending up in unpaid internships for companies that make a profit, or providing free labor for the shows of their teachers. Think of variable and ungodly working hours, but never being taught how to bill your hours at the end of the day, or even that you should charge for your services as an artist. The ethos of the school focuses more on hands-on making, on 'getting to work', on questioning 'how one makes'. Because, apparently, we were all just meant to be children playing in the mud for four years until reality hits nice and hard. And we, in the end, compromise quietly. Maybe we look back for a second to our elders that got by with free education, squatted houses, financial state support, no debt and government funding by default and weep.

I made my attempts in bringing practical talks to the Rietveld and failed. In the spring of 2019, I dared to pitch to the school what could be called the beginning of thinking about professional practice. The result? I got canceled. I made a mistake in thinking the Gerrit Rietveld Academy is ready to face matters of practicalities in terms of artists' work. But this got me thinking on yet another level. Is the Gerrit Rietveld Academy the last bastion of artistic freedom? By not engaging with talks about the market, can it preserve its independence? Or is it merely in denial as to what the material conditions for artists are, both locally and internationally? To go even one step further, are they willfully sabotaging the careers or future artists by keeping them in the dark as to the possibilities of the field, the opportunities they have available and the paths they can pursue, for profit?

Also, do students experience any awareness of their conditions? A few months back, I've stumbled across a friend in a local Amsterdam museum. We were both waiting for a lecture to begin

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or commenting on a lecture which had ended, and we chose to spend the time chatting in the vast museum atrium, next to the coffee area and bookshop, leaning ever so gently on the side of the wardrobe. Me, a still-young practicing artist, her, a first-year student at a reputable art academy (see above). She indeed seemed to be dissatisfied with the conditions of her education. Having weathered a few storms within the profession, I asked her: 'Why not rebel against the constraints of her position? Why not question the status quo?' To which she brought up a discussion she had with her father. Cue: previous generation. He had told his daughter that she could be as free as she wants. She has the leeway financially, she temporarily has her family's support, but as to the future she shapes, when she shapes it, she should do well to think of one primary issue: what kind of lifestyle does she want to have?



Shooting Myself in the Foot (with Azurite Healing Crystal Toe Ring) 2018  
Opposite Page: Shooting Myself in the Foot (with Unakite Healing Crystal Toe Ring) 2018 (detail)  
A laser cut, steel outline of my foot attached to a field target. Then, repeatedly fired at with steel BBs.

Cassidy Toner, 'Shooting Myself in the Foot (with Azurite Healing Crystal Toe Ring)' (2018).

One of my favorite works as of late is Cassidy Toner's *Shooting Myself in the Foot (with Azurite Healing Crystal Toe Ring)* (2018). The piece is a laser-cut, steel outline of her foot attached to a field target, then, repeatedly fired at with steel BBs. It perfectly encapsulates both the glitz and glamour of our current condition as exemplified by the toe ring and the self-sabotage that we subject ourselves to while trying to maintain our 'lifestyle'. True, one thing is missing: the amount of misery we inflict on those that cannot even consider achieving the lifestyle we so desperately cling to. Thinking in terms of our predicament, maybe it's

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time to reconsider what arts education is supposed to be and take over the reins.

By now, it's April 2020. Revolution is the only way to go. But even despite the urgency of the crisis triggered in the Netherlands in mid-March by the COVID19 restrictions, revolution is not as straightforward as one might think.

In the last week of March, a letter of dissent was written by the students of the Sandberg Institute, the Master program tied to the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. In it, the students, supported by their teachers and by the art student unions that popped up over the past couple of years, demanded accountability from the administration of the institution after the closing of the academy and the rushed move of many of their in-person meetings and classes to online platforms. They asked for participation in the handling of the crisis, they asked for a postponement of the academic year and refused to see their graduation show moved online. They asked for refunds of tuition fees in light of the lack of access to facilities, in case the building would remain shut well into the summer vacation. They asked for an understanding of their condition, affected as it is by the limitations the government of the Netherlands has put on education, public gatherings, and various jobs – the service industry is a field in which a large swath of students was employed to support themselves, and much of it has been suspended. They asked for understanding in the face of the international character of the academy and the fact that many students have had to leave to the country to be with their families, and for an understanding of the fact that focus is hard to come by in a crisis triggered by a pandemic. These are not normal working from home conditions. Education should not be instantly transferred into online mode, pretending to forget what triggered the change of habit and working on the premise of 'business as usual'.

The letter was signed on March 30th, 2020. It reached my inbox by mistake. It slipped through the cracks of a stuffy newsletter,

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most likely due to the exhaustion of whoever put the newsletter together. It wasn't meant for public consumption, but the mere fact that it existed signaled some form of solidarity in the face of hopelessness. The letter illustrated a bottom-up change of pace.

On March 31st, the Student Council of the Rietveld Academy and Sandberg Institute went one step further, this time publicly, and took responsibility for providing what was needed during the crisis. It issued a short guide with resources for international students, artists and art workers in the Netherlands. It broke the taboo on professional competences by acknowledging the type of support needed by students in a time of crisis, practical information such as: what is a freelancer? What is a zero-hour contract? What support does the government provide in times of crisis? What should one do if their contract is not being renewed? What is unemployment and how to apply for it? How to get legal assistance? And so on.

Students had been plunged into the land of terminated contracts, no income, and even homelessness and under these conditions, the knowledge disseminated in the guide really meant power. Before the guide was published the only other reaction came from the administration of the school in the form of abstract solidarity messages and encouraging speeches overlaid on videos of an empty Academy.

Then came April 1st, 2020. (The timeline that I'm building is idiosyncratic, but it may be worth asking if the administration of these schools had also kept an eye on the student initiatives that went counter to the need to adapt, keep one's head up and keep up productivity.) The Sandberg, or rather it's press office, sent out a newsletter to all of its followers, I'm guessing students and teachers included, in which it announced its 'Homemade Routines':

"How do we clean, paint, administrate, chat, prototype, stretch, cook, read, watch and dream during a period of social distancing? A growing accumulation of

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activities by artists and designers, live-streamed for free on Wednesdays on Sandberg Instituut Instagram, echo a different pace and concentration for our home-made behaviors.”

It covered:

08:00 - Cleaning

10:00 - Painting

11:00 - Administrating

13:00 - Chatting

15:00 - Prototyping

16:00 - Stretching

17:00 - Cooking

20:00 - Reading

21:00 - Watching

23:00 - Dreaming

24/7 production.

Despite the crisis, despite the confusion, despite resistance, despite solidarity, it seems the post-autonomous artist cannot catch a break, endlessly fucked as he or she or they are by the neoliberal need to be present, to be flexible, to adapt to precarity with a smile.

But rather than be lured by the need for visibility and overwhelmed by fear of missing out on immediate career enhancement, it's worth considering, despite the calls for going back to normal, how this former normal turned young art students and future artists into precarious subjects. And now more than ever, in this small space for change that's opening up, it's time to stand up and refuse to return to what was before.

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# REMOTE WORK? DEMAND DIAL-UP

ON A NEW NETIQUETTE, CREATED BY CULTURAL WORKERS.



By Silvio Lorusso, June 2020

Workwise, my smart lockdown had a hellish beginning. I couldn't install Microsoft Teams, my camera wouldn't activate, and, worst of all, the internet connection had hiccups. It was not like either up or down; every other half it just became super slow. I let you imagine my videocalls: all went smooth for the first five minutes and then decay took over: frozen faces, fractured voices, reboots and refreshes, impatience and discouragement. A short sentence would take minutes to unfold. It was like being thrown back to the times of dial-up connection, but with today's online means of communication.

But, hey, the dial-up era wasn't so frustrating, was it? A thought emerged and I couldn't shake it off: during this sudden, massive shift to remote work, having dial-up connectivity would have been not so bad. So, I tried to picture what dial-up remote work would look like today.

Most of the communication channels we have nowadays, like chat or email, would still be available. One could still record a presentation and ask their peers to download it. There would be no smartphone as we understand it, and therefore no notifications at night or on the weekend. Sure, we couldn't do many of the synchronous things we do today like collectively editing a document or designing a poster, but to what extent do we use them anyway?

In any case, we would have been able to send files back and forth. If one needed to converse, they could still give a phone call.

The main missing thing would be the plethora of live meetings that are tiring both to attend and especially to moderate. Private spaces would be preserved: no need to kick your partner out of the room or make sure that your kids don't yell while you're talking. More emails, you say? I'm not sure: I still get a lot of emails – next to Teams alerts and Whatsapp messages. But at least you could go through the emails at your own pace.

Dial-up was expensive. But also broadband costs money; it's just that in most of the Global North we take it granted, like electricity. Surprisingly, the ones that don't take it for granted are big tech companies. A friend of mine who works at Google told me that big G pays half of his internet bill. That's where you find contemporary notions of welfare: in the corporate world. In the dial-up scenario, the state would fund the internet connection and, since that would be expensive, people wouldn't be asked to spend 8 or 10 hours hunched in front of the screen. Work hours would be reduced and God knows how much that is needed.

This is a crude and implausible sketch, I know. As I know that broadband, used for instance in the medical field, can save lives. Or that less than half of the world population has internet access. Don't mind the humorous title: mine is not an anti-broadband degrowth argument – that would be ridiculous. My argument is not about technology or infrastructure per se, but about the social conventions and power imbalances that coalesce in and around technology. So, don't call me Luddite<sup>1</sup>. Actually, feel free to do so, as this was exactly what Luddites were dealing with. Things are changing fast: the pandemic interregnum will end soon and new conventions will settle. Companies and educational institutions are going remote for good: half of Facebook employees are expected to work remotely over the next decade.

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1. The Luddites were a secret oath-based organisation of English textile workers in the 19th century, a radical faction which destroyed textile machinery.

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Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey announced that his employee will be able to work from home forever. At Cambridge University, all lectures will be online-only until [at least, nda] summer 2021. Right now, there is maybe still a bit of room to determine what this will mean for students and workers.

We must be alert, or alertness will subjugate us. We should question the technologies we use and even more the cultural norms crystallized around them. Yes, innovation can improve life and work conditions; but it can also create new life and work expectations. And those are not always favorable. The case of household appliances comes to mind. When originally introduced, their promise was to free up the time of housewives by making chores more quick and efficient, but, as historian Ruth Cowan demonstrated, they ended up raising the standards of cleanliness and hygiene, creating even more work for their end users.

Broadband is not just about the technical affordance of networked instantaneity and simultaneity. It contributed to the forming of expectations of availability and presence, making it once again hard for the workers to self-determine their rhythms and their appearance (now allegorized by the half-pijama-half-suit look). These days, telecommuting is presented as an inexpensive solution to make work more autonomous. But the current social-technical norms make it not as liberating as it could be.

What's the role of cultural workers in all this? In many ways, their work has become as managerial as any other during the lockdown. Therefore, more than on the word "work", I'd like to focus on the word "culture". There is a whole new culture of online activity to be crafted. One that praises asynchronicity and modulation of interactivity. One that is attentive to the growing cognitive load of digital mediation. A netiquette of attention and presence, if you will. This doesn't need to be invented from scratch. After all, people have been talking about calm technology since 1996.

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Curator and writer Michelle Kasprzak, a cultural worker herself, penned an amusing Anti-Video Chat Manifesto.<sup>2</sup> She thunders: ‘DOWN with the tyranny of the lipstick and hairbrush ever beside the computer, to adjust your looks to fit expectations of looking “professional”’. This shows how technological defaults combine perversely with social norms. It’s time to articulate – or better re-articulate – communicative self-determination in a broad, encompassing way, taking into account not just the ‘new normal’ but also the old normals we want to salvage or get rid of.

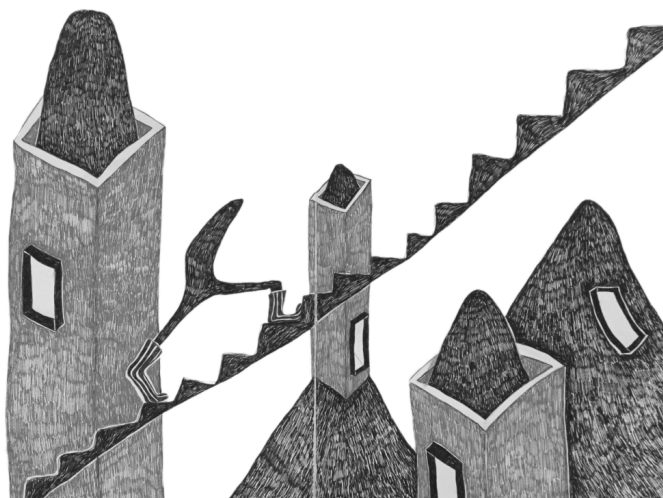
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2. <https://michelle.kasprzak.ca/blog/writing-lecturing/anti-video-chat-manifesto>

# 1902 WORDS OF GUILT

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS IN TEXT AND IMAGE ON FREELANCING IN THE ARTS WITHOUT AN EU-PASSPORT.

Under normal working conditions, it would take us months to arrange one of our Skypeversations. During the Corona nightlife, our appointments are of a more spontaneous nature. We throw facts at each other about stuff that happened in our lives since our last virtual meeting. "I've been feeling down, but now I'm fine. How are you and why have you been up to, to what you have been?" Although I sometimes crave to skip this casual, factual catch-up, it always comes down to politely and keenly listening to each other's stories. We style the conversation without the intention to dramatize the stories too much, allowing the other's fantasy to fill the gaps. She tells me stuff; I tell her stuff. The sum of all confessions leaves me with the impression that both of our realities were a bit harsher compared to the last sum of confessions. I could predict that the resulting bitterness would act like a spice on top of what we were about to speak of next.



After a while, the facts tend to leave the virtual table of discussion, found beneath the digital smoke of our cigarettes.

I feel, and I see the excitement entering the conversation. Our eyes open widely as we dive deeper into the emotional fabrics of our existence. We try to untangle the knots, by telling the big elephant in both of our rooms to stop camouflaging. Under normal working conditions, during this stage of our talk, we would turn into 'witches' and bring out our sleepy tendencies (feminist, pessimist, irrational, vulgar, poor but sexy), triggered by the world around us. We would bounce against the standards by expressing what we find is publicly suppressed. We would exorcise each 'injustice' with laughter, as an agreement and a personal victory. Under current working conditions, however, our witchcraft is on hold. It's waiting to be triggered, to be pulled by something which is nowhere onshore. This time, sparked by internal needs, we start uncovering the guilt and fears we are forced to face, when given time to do nothing.

*\*\*\* the world around us: semi-funky situations created within the circles of working gigs, gig relationships and travels to gigs in different countries. \*\*\**

Suddenly, the elephant stops camouflaging and concludes the following about my friend and me:

- As crafty freelancers, we are both eligible to get a fancy minimum wage from the government (French + Dutch);
- As crafty freelancers, we are both in flux and existentially affected by Corona;
- Without the governmental support, we could both be financially supported by our families but,
- We both decided that we don't want to be supported by our families.
- Our favorite party is Eid Moebarak (the Bosnian version);
- There are three reasons why we feel like we're on a holiday right now:

1. We can do more work.
  2. If we don't, nobody will know.
  3. If someone finds out about our unproductiveness, we will be excused because... crisis.  
Even web-developers are excused because of the crisis.
- ... At the same time, we agree that, just because we are in a similarly privileged position, it doesn't mean that our feelings of guilt are equal. Acknowledging our differences is one of the reasons why our lungs will hate us forever. Many more cigarettes contribute to the continuation of our conversation.

### *Inhale.*

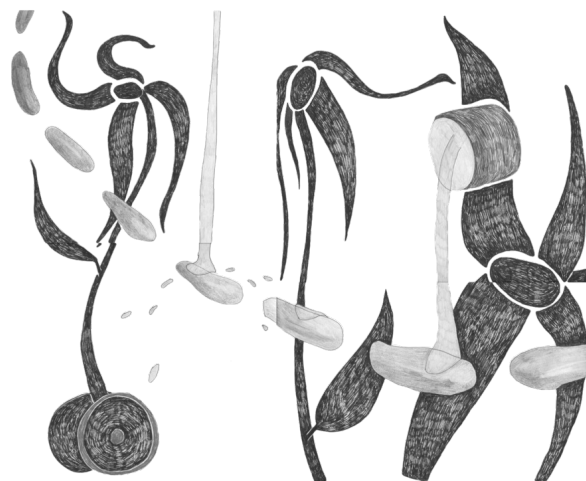
Both under normal and current living conditions, a precarious worker is always doomed to feel guilty in their own unique way.

### *Exhale.*

While she has it all (*shelter + roof + money*), my friend is feeling guilty for having a lot of time to think about the French neighborhoods where the crisis settled a long time ago, and where families have no better living situations to lock themselves in. My friend is angry at the cop for fining a homeless person (3x) for being on the streets. She nervously snickered at the ridiculousness of the situation, while purchasing an e-reader online for the sake of her sanity. Yes, my friend is feeling guilty for buying an e-reader, and for enjoying the investment.

While I have it all, too (*shelter + roof + money*), my usual non-European guilt hugs me hard. Coming from Bosnia & Herzegovina in order to pursue an art career, I can say that I live comfortably in the city of Amsterdam. I consider myself quite integrated in and accepted by European society. But, undeniably, my passport has remained very non-European.

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The pandemic brought to fore the hidden layers of my un-belonging. I experienced something close to a heart attack when masses of expats started fleeing from the Netherlands during the first two weeks of the Corona outbreak. I never had a heart attack. But yeah, it looked like they had been waiting for that one final reason to shine on them as a divine beam of light, a perfect excuse to pack up and leave. Although I find the reason legitimate, I cannot deny that my empathy is limited (to their need to return back, wherever back is).

Speaking from my non-European perspective, Europe is the same everywhere I look (within the EU). Although I am sometimes bored by its regulatory repetitiveness and always the same infosphere, I appreciate the conditions each time I pay a visit to Bosnia, where I get stabbed by the memory of why I left. So, I miss EU whenever I find myself outside of your borders.

On the other hand, I have contemplated my reasons to leave the Netherlands too. I've nourished them in my head for a long time; but with a well-crafted discipline, I must admit that I have successfully suppressed that desire.

I repeat, the pandemic enhanced the hidden layers of my un-belonging. Again and again, I find myself re-defining the meaning and location of a triangle-roofed house from the drawing which for so long, defined home. What's the point of feeling

nostalgic? Should I go back? – I admit that I like to miss (that's an excuse I settle for). Even though I'm dying to be with the ones surrounding the triangle-roofed house in the drawing, the Corona outbreak didn't spark the urge to go back to the image. I told my friend: 'If there's anything I'm anxious about now, it's the lack of desire to go back home.' But the feeling didn't last long. The anxiety was soothed as the borders closed down; the silence after the rush became a different kind of pain.

*\*\*\* ticklish internal needs: pulling out the tear-wet layers of guilt and non-guilt, letting them dry before one's eyes, while simultaneously accepting the future of wearing them. \*\*\**



[the conversation ended; I wake up to a different day]

I gaze out from my balcony while listening to Aphex Twin. Through the digital noise, I try to listen to myself. The mixture of noise and my thoughts become the background music to the image playing out in front of me. Other people are on their little balconies too. They are unsuspectingly reading the news, drinking, working out, and busying themselves with the things that have already been capitalized by someone, somewhere.

As the stillness of my surroundings starts to sound interesting, I ask myself: "What am I trying to hear this time?"

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A memory? Probably. Internal fear(s)? Maybe, too. Something along both lines.”

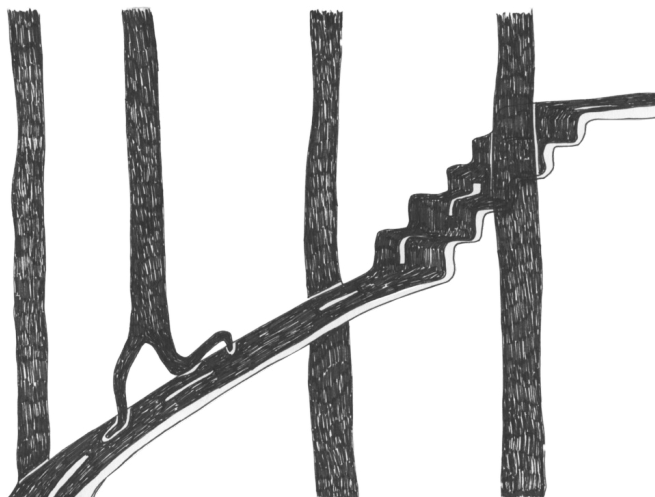
I know that a quest for answers would bring back last night's anxieties. Unlike normally, the idea of feeling guilty bores me this time. I change my thinking strategy and indulge myself in solution-oriented fantasies, powered by the Netherlands:

“In case of crisis or emergency, first make sure that you saw the crisis coming and that now you’re prepared for its shocking effect. Prior to anything happening, imagine what could be a potential catastrophe. Think of strategies to deal with the catastrophe, then think of solutions. Think of plan B solutions. Plan C solutions wouldn’t hurt in this case. In this way, whatever happens, you will not be surprised. And mind your step.”

Once applied to life and personal angst today, the fantasies go into further detail. The catastrophe I imagine is a funeral of my loved one back home. I am confronted by the following questions: “How will I travel? What would be a perfect timing for the occasion? How much savings do I have (I know the answer to that)? Whom to ask for money? Which family member to contact for the funeral? Which rituals must be included in the funeral ceremony? Who will do the graphic design for the announcements? Is there a budget for that? Whom to invite? Will my European friends come? Whom to rely on?”

By the time I asked myself all of these questions and wrote them down, it was too late to deny having them. If this happening could potentially kill my emotional stability, I thought I’d better prepare for its shock effect. So that when it shocks, it doesn’t shock too much. And if none of this becomes more than a catastrophic scenario in my head, I can only consider myself to be lucky.

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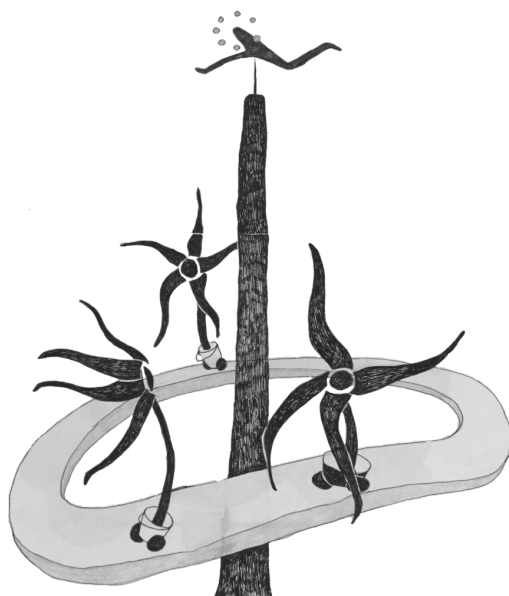
I listen to the sound of my social status (again): an artist, a writer, and – there was something else. A clock is ticking loudly in my head. Whatever happens behind this insecurity is well defined in my ZZP business history. Being a ZZP'er gives a reason for guilt to grow. Without long-term financial security, my fears make me believe that obtaining European documents matters to me more than my despair to go home. But, honestly, having great ideas for great projects ahead of me is not enough to feel safe about the future. And if all of this would be consequential to me only, and not to my family members back home as well, I probably wouldn't feel as guilty to have chosen the career of flux.

I rewind and listen to the sound tape of my integration. It sounds like binge-scrolling down the news feed for hours in a complete silence. After years of dwelling in the limitations of almost being an EU citizen, but never quite there, I can proudly say that I've built a good relationship with my fears. They became good friends of mine. I take them for a walk, and we pretend to be privileged together; that we've built a very long working history together and that, now, it's all paying off. We pretend that we've grown immune to pain and that we will go fishing together soon. We strictly avoid thinking about the cons of wanting to officially integrate into Europe, and save it for future ponders.



Q to myself: "What needs to be re-thought?" A to myself and to others: "Who's asking and who's answering?"

I focus on what I'm gazing at from my balcony. Other balconies, inhabited by an occasional kick-boxer, tanning early birds, a daytime love story, The Brunch Society, BBQ-keeper, punch drunk love, a loudly bored dog, and the gardener. Thrown across a panoptic building, our gazes cannot not meet. From that gaze, it looks like we all agree to what's going on here. It looks like we are holding our urban hyperactivity on a leash, hoping it won't get restless enough to break the leash. No matter how shaky the situation feels, we're all waiting for the world to give us a green light to start distracting ourselves.



A smoker in a suit comes out on his balcony and smokes a cigarette.

# HOW PRECARIOUS IS WORKING IN THE CULTURAL SECTOR?

ON WHAT THE NUMBERS SHOW US, AND THE QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS WE CAN DERIVE FROM THAT.

Recently, CBS (Statistics Netherlands) published an article with data about culture, sport, and recreation.<sup>1</sup> Although these figures are not new, they do show how vulnerable the labour market is within the cultural and creative sector in the midst of the corona crisis. The proportion of one-person businesses had never been higher than it was when the cultural sector had to shut its doors in mid-March. What do these figures tell us about labour relations in the cultural sector? And why is this topic especially important now?

These questions formed a starting point for a discussion between Claartje Rasterhoff and Bjorn Schrijen with philosopher of art and culture Thijs Lijster on the cultural labour market before and after corona. Just as culture makers' work practice served as a model for labour organisations in recent decades, they may now play a pioneering role in the development of alternative forms of organisation, such as collective associations and self-organisation.

## THE NUMBERS

First, the numbers. If we look at the sub-sectors that were included in the 'art' category in the *Standaard Bedrijfsindeling* (Standard Business Classification, SBI) of the CBS, then it appears that in the second quarter of 2020, 88,620 businesses were active within these sectors. 83,520 of these are one-person businesses, amounting to 94.2%.<sup>2</sup> Even if we use a significantly broader definition of the cultural and creative

1. CBS, 'Feiten en cijfers over de cultuur, sport en recreatie' ('Facts and figures on culture, sport, and recreation'), CBS, 24 April 2020, [www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/achtergrond/2020/17/feiten-en-cijfers-over-de-cultuur-sport-en-recreatie](http://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/achtergrond/2020/17/feiten-en-cijfers-over-de-cultuur-sport-en-recreatie).

2. CBS, 'Bedrijven; bedrijfstak' ('Businesses: Industry') (narrow cultural and

creative sector selection), CBS, 15 April 2020, [opendata.cbs.nl](http://opendata.cbs.nl). All the figures on businesses in 2019 and 2020 mentioned in this article have a (further) provisional status in the source data. That is also true of the cited number of self-employed persons in 2016.

sector like in Table 1, the share of one-person businesses remains very high.<sup>3</sup>

	Aantal bedrijven	Aantal eenmanszaken	Aandeel eenmanszaken
<b>Kunsten</b>	90.865	84.980	93,5 %
<b>Media &amp; Entertainment</b>	49.775	44.675	89,8 %
<b>Creatieve zakelijke dienstverlening</b>	72.325	62.505	86,4 %
<b>Totaal</b>	212.965	192.160	90,2 %

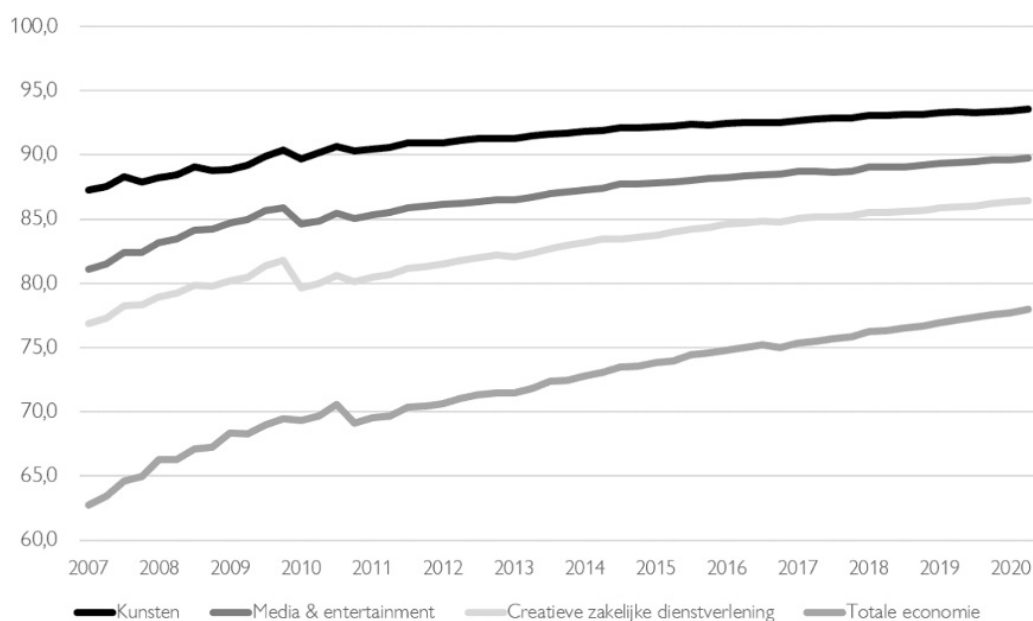
Overview of businesses and one-person enterprises in the cultural and creative sector, second quarter of 2020. Data source: CBS 'Bedrijven; bedrijfstak' ('Businesses: Industry') (broad cultural and creative sector selection), CBS, 15 April 2020, opendata.cbs.nl, on the basis of the demarcation of the cultural sector from CBS, *Cultuur in beeld 2018* (Culture in the Picture 2018).

The percentage of one-person businesses in the cultural and creative sector has always been high – and given makers' individual practices, not surprising – but since the start date of this data series in 2007, the share has undeniably increased further. Moreover, the percentage of one-person businesses in the cultural and creative sector is considerably higher than in the economy as a whole, where at the moment 78% of all businesses are one-person enterprises.<sup>4</sup>

3. CBS, 'Bedrijven; bedrijfstak' ('Businesses: Industry') (broad cultural and creative sector selection), CBS, 15 April 2020, opendata.cbs.nl. This classification of the cultural sector is in line with the classification that the CBS made earlier for *Cultuur in Beeld* (Culture in the Picture). For an overview of the sub-sectors

that fall under this classification, see CBS, *Cultuur in beeld 2018* (Culture in the Picture 2018) (The Hague/Heerlen: *Centraal Bureau voor de statistiek* [Statistics Netherlands], 2018).

4. CBS, 'Bedrijven; bedrijfstak' ('Businesses: Industry') (whole economy), CBS, 15 April 2020, opendata.cbs.nl.



Development of the proportion of one-person businesses in the cultural sector, 2007-2020 (%). Data source: CBS, 'Bedrijven; bedrijfstak' ('Businesses: Industry') (broad cultural and creative sector selection), CBS, 15 April 2020, [opendata.cbs.nl](https://opendata.cbs.nl), on the basis of the demarcation of the cultural sector from CBS, *Cultuur in beeld 2018* (Culture in the Picture 2018).

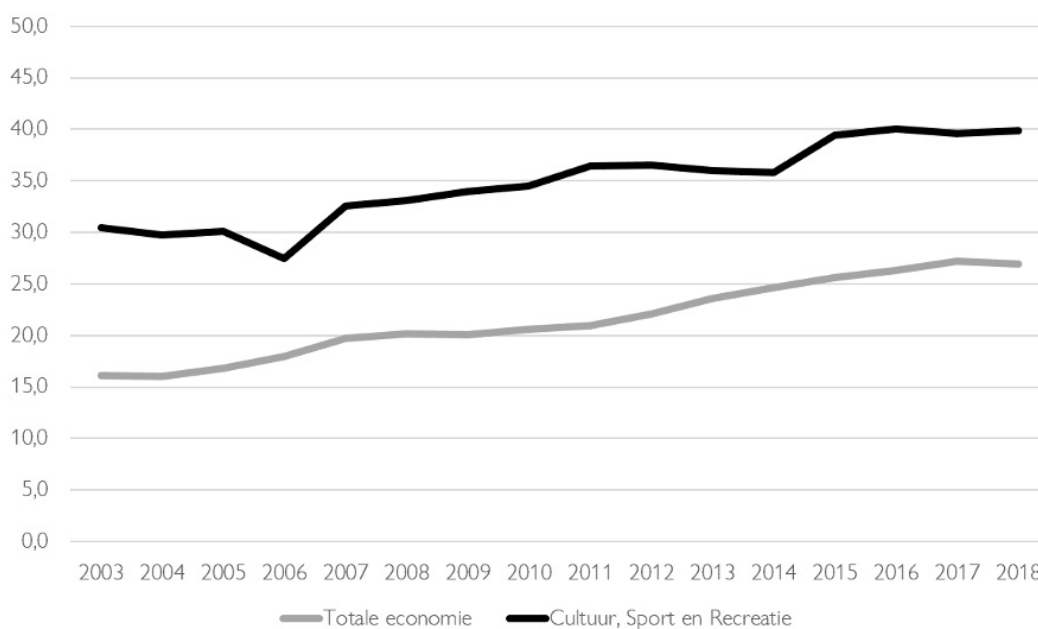
Due to the high number of one-person businesses in the cultural sector, there is also an above-average number of people who earn their income through self-employment. In 2016, there were 124,560 self-employed persons and 146,490 employees in the sector.<sup>5</sup> Based on this and previous data from Statistics Netherlands, it seems to be a safe assumption that in 2020, half of those working in the cultural and creative sector are self-employed. Thus, the share of self-employed persons in the cultural and creative sector is higher than in the economy as a whole, where at the end of 2019, 16.7% of the working labour force (primary) were self-employed.<sup>6</sup>

If you present these figures to Thijs Lijster – author of *Verenigt u! Arbeid in de 21ste eeuw* (*Unite! Labour in the 21st Century*, 2019) – he immediately remarks that the self-employed are not necessarily economically vulnerable. It is quite possible to create financial security from independent entrepreneurship, and working independently can in fact also contribute to a feeling

5. CBS, *Cultuur in beeld 2018* (Culture in the Picture 2018).

6. CBS, 'Arbeidsdeelname; kerncijfers' ('Labour participation: Key numbers'), CBS, 13 februari 2020, [opendata.cbs.nl](https://opendata.cbs.nl).

of autonomy and control. Also, self-employed workers are not the only group of workers who may be vulnerable in this crisis. Cultural sector employees with a temporary or flexible contract can quickly end up with financial difficulties if employers do not extend their contracts due to profit losses, reduced demand, or uncertainty. At the end of 2018, 26.7% of all employees in the Netherlands had such a flexible employment arrangement. In the culture, sport, and recreation sector, this proportion was 42.6%; after horeca (the hotel, restaurant, and café industry, 62.0%) the highest share of all major categories in the SBI.<sup>7</sup>



Proportion of employees with a flexible employment arrangement compared to all employees in the whole economy and the culture, sport, and recreation sector, 2003–2018 (%). Data source: CBS, 'Werkzame beroepsbevolking; bedrijf', ('Working labour force: Business').

When we try to estimate the vulnerability of participants in the cultural labour market, we shouldn't only look at the labour relations, but also how they interact with social arrangements and other dimensions of job security. Sociologists, economists, and philosophers are increasingly designating work that offers insufficient or no income security as precarious work. The emphasis here lies on how labour associations are organised, who benefits from them and who does not, and how precariousness can help

7. CBS, 'Werkzame beroepsbevolking; bedrijf' ('Working labour force: Business'), CBS, 29 november 2019, [opendata.cbs.nl](https://opendata.cbs.nl).

to expose forms of faux-self-employment and (self-)exploitation. Lijster points to the work of economist Guy Standing, who distinguishes different forms of labour security. In his book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011), Standing also distinguishes between security in the durability of knowledge and skills, and security in autonomy over one's position and representation in (political) negotiations.<sup>8</sup> If we apply these last two dimensions to creative work, you can, according to Lijster, say that individual creative work also becomes precarious because the sector as a whole is precarious as a result of declining and uncertain public funding.

In addition to the type of labour arrangement and the contract type, let's also look at wages and social security. On average, wages in the cultural sector are considerably lower than in the economy as a whole. In 2018, the average hourly wages within the SBI code 'culture, sport, and recreation' amounted to €20.47, compared to €22.69 in the economy as a whole. If this is extended to monthly and annual wages, a cultural worker earns an average of €729 per month and €11,080 per year less than the average employee in the Netherlands.<sup>9</sup> Only employees in the horeca sector and the 'rental and other business services' sector earned less on an annual basis.<sup>10</sup> Self-employed persons within the 'culture, sport, and recreation' sector also have a much lower income than colleagues in other sectors: their average personal annual income in 2018 was €12,000 lower than the average annual income of self-employed persons in the economy as a whole. Moreover, financial reserves in the form of wealth among self-employed persons in the 'culture, sport, and recreation' sector are the smallest of all economic sectors.<sup>11</sup> It's hardly surprising then that the call for better wages in the cultural sector has been resounding loudly in recent years, which resulted in the Fair Practice Code that was introduced last year.

8. Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 10.

9. The monthly amount includes overtime, and the yearly amount includes bonuses.

10. CBS, 'Employment Opportunity: Jobs, wages, working hours', SBI2008:

Key figures' (*Werkgelegenheid; banen, lonen, arbeidsduur, SBI2008; kerncijfers*), CBS, 30 September 2019, [opendata.cbs.nl](https://opendata.cbs.nl).

11. CBS, 'Self-employed Persons: Incomes, wealth, industry' (*Zelfstandigen; inkomen, vermogen, bedrijfstak*), CBS, 22 november 2019, [opendata.cbs.nl](https://opendata.cbs.nl).

The social safety net also doesn't provide security for everyone. The *Zelfstandige Enquête Arbeid* (Self-employed Labour Survey, ZEA) conducted among more than 5,500 self-employed entrepreneurs shows that many self-employed persons without employees (zzp'ers), including in the cultural sector, do not have disability insurance or pension provisions. At the beginning of 2019, more than four in ten self-employed persons without employees indicated that they had no disability provisions whatsoever. They do not have insurance for their self-employed work, do not participate in a bread fund, and also cannot fall back on savings, investments, or capital invested in their company or home.

## PRECARIOUS WORK

Thus, a large part of the cultural sector consists of zzp'ers and employees with flexible contracts, many of whom have relatively low incomes, small buffers, and few social provisions. It is therefore not surprising that they are experiencing acute financial difficulties now that the demand for their services and products is decreasing due to corona and has in some cases vanished completely. Although some entrepreneurs and zzp'ers are eligible for temporary provisions like TOZO (*Tijdelijke overbruggingsregeling zelfstandig ondernemers*, Temporary Bridging Measure for Self-employed Professionals) and TOGS (*Tegemoetkoming Ondernemers Getroffen Sectoren*, Reimbursement for Entrepreneurs in Affected Sectors), many have been left out.<sup>12</sup> For example, recent research into the music industry<sup>13</sup> commissioned by Buma/Stemra and Sena showed that 40% of the more than 2,000 (self-employed) entrepreneurs surveyed have claimed TOZO and about 10% have claimed TOGS. One third of the respondents in the survey indicated that they are not eligible for the temporary provisions.

12. Rogier Brom and Bjorn Schrijen, *Hoe Komt De Cultuursector Uit De Coronacrisis?*, Boekmanstichting, 2020, [www.boekman.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Hoe-komt-de-cultuursector-uit-de-coronacrisis-Volledig-16-april.pdf](http://www.boekman.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Hoe-komt-de-cultuursector-uit-de-coronacrisis-Volledig-16-april.pdf)

13. Buma/Stemra and Sena, *De muziekindustrie in tijden van corona: Een onderzoek naar de huidige stand van zaken*, 29 april 2020, [www.bumastemra.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Rapport-Buma-Stemra-en-Sena-29420.pdf](http://www.bumastemra.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Rapport-Buma-Stemra-en-Sena-29420.pdf)

The CBS numbers confirm the picture of uncertainty and vulnerability that has emerged from recent studies<sup>14</sup> into the consequences of corona for makers in the cultural sector. But perhaps the numbers can offer us even more now that, for example, the Raad voor Cultuur (Council for Culture) is developing scenarios<sup>15</sup> for the future of the cultural sector. They also remind us that the economic vulnerability of the cultural labour market is partly due to the organisation of labour relations. Of course, the individual manner of working, which is often not demand driven, and thus entails a particular degree of uncertainty, is something of an integral part of some creative labour. With the increasing importance of creativity in the development of economic activities in recent decades, the professional practice of artists and other creative makers has served as a model for the many 'non-standard jobs' that have replaced the traditional standard full-time position in recent decades, as Lijster describes in *Unite!*

## CONNECTION AND SOLIDARITY

What should we do now that the consequences of the corona crisis confirm that work in the cultural sector is, to a considerable extent, precarious? Lijster sketches a serious dilemma: how can we create a common destiny and make new connections with each other despite the physical distance? Flocking to the Malieveld does not seem like an option for the time being. He also notes that culture makers sometimes show little solidarity. By offering their work for nothing or little, makers can undermine the collective and unintentionally also contribute to the loyalty calculus of clients and employers.

Nevertheless, Lijster thinks that the cultural sector can play a pioneering role in addressing job insecurity and stimulating solidarity, especially when it comes to connecting with other sectors. Just as culture makers' professional practice served as a model for labour organisation in recent decades, they may now play a pioneering role in the development of alternative

14. *Coronaplatform voor onderzoeksvragen en kennisdeling in cultuur*, Boekmanstichting, [www.boekman.nl/thema/coronaplatform](http://www.boekman.nl/thema/coronaplatform)

15. Marijke van Hees & Jakob van der Waarden, 'Brief aan minister van

Engelshoven - Snelle innovatie door culturele en creatieve sector nodig', Raad Voor Cultuur, 18 mei 2020. Download hier: [www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/documenten/brieven/2020/05/18/scenariobrief-aan-minister](http://www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/documenten/brieven/2020/05/18/scenariobrief-aan-minister)



forms of organisation, such as collective associations and self-organisation. In addition, Lijster argues, artists can use their imagination to play an important role in making personal experiences collective, thereby connecting the self-employed and employees in various domains and internationally.

Just after we spoke to Thijs Lijster on the phone, white statues of a supermarket stock clerk, an artist, a cleaner, a rubbish collector, a nurse, a teacher, a police officer, a journalist, our prime minister, and the CEO of KLM appeared on the Malieveld. Each on a pedestal, but one slightly higher than the other. With this campaign, initiators Platform BK and creator Yuri Veerman pose the question: “How much money does a hero earn?” (“*Hoeveel geld verdient een held?*”). We may not be able to gather *en masse* on the Malieveld, but we can depict and question precarious work inside and outside the cultural sector.



The kick-off of the Platform BK image campaign 'For Our Heroes' on the Malieveld, The Hague, 20 May 2020. Concept: Yuri Veerman. Photo: Sjoerd Kribbeeler.

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16. 'Lokaal cultuurbeleid', Boekman, nummer 130. Bestel hier [www.boekman.nl/tijdschrift/boekman-130-lokaal-cultuurbeleid](http://www.boekman.nl/tijdschrift/boekman-130-lokaal-cultuurbeleid)

# THE ARTIFICIAL COMMUNITY

ON THE VULNERABILITY OF AN ART COMMUNITY THAT MUST SUCCEED.



Illustration by Atelier Yuri Veerman.

By Claire van der Mee, January 2021

Right before the ‘intelligent lockdown’ was broadcast on national news, as a result of the Covid19 pandemic, I handed in my thesis about the artist community in which I reside. The fact that this announcement took place just after handing in my thesis was not only ironic because that what previously withheld me from having any social contact (completing my thesis) had now been replaced by a mandatory lockdown- but it was also ironic because the coronavirus put a lot of what I had been criticizing in my thesis, in a different perspective. I was arguing that the artist community in ‘Broedplaats Lely’ (for those unfamiliar with the term *broedplaats*: a *broedplaats* literally translates into incubator and is a collectively shared building for artists and entrepreneurs in the cultural and creative sector) in Amsterdam was an artificial community and I posed the question if this could rightfully be called a community at all.

Changes that coincide with crises often cause instability. Recently that led to the closing down of many organizations in precarious positions. This was also the case for organizations

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located in Broedplaats Lely. At the same time, major changes can also uncover opportunities in, what previously seemed, to be an impenetrable system. I had just concluded my research on the artist community in Broedplaats Lely – a study critiquing the false pretenses under which these communities are established and the rigid frameworks in which the artist is expected to maneuver. The consequences of the pandemic, however, underlined the value of a community; displaying how communities operate and why now, more than ever, it is crucial to save space for the formation of sustainable and lasting communities.

Feelings of togetherness are important to us. This was made clear by recent advertisements assuring us that we were all forced into isolation in order to help each other, we were all isolating *together*. In the supermarkets songs on the radio were interrupted by emotional requests laden with sentimental, cinematic music; requesting us to keep distance and to do so *together*. Companies have of course been using people's desire to feel connected as promotional means for years and the interest of community is, currently, being applied more frequently as a reason to establish social projects.

As a person in my late twenties with an income quite below average, I would often stumble upon such community projects throughout my search for housing. In Amsterdam it's difficult to find affordable housing but there are arrangements where, for example, you can receive rent reduction in exchange for community service. Perhaps this turn to community is a response to the growing individualism of our society or perhaps it is an answer to our disappearing welfare state, nevertheless, the coronavirus crisis made apparent how many people live in isolation and experience loneliness.

Members of a community take care of and support each other, and communities contribute to people feeling like they are a part of something. Still, when the supermarket is using sentimentality to connect me to my fellow consumer (who is hopefully keeping

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1,5 meter distance in the narrow shopping aisles) I likewise wonder what the underlying intention is of housing corporations or organizations when they are promoting the establishment of community projects.

Artists being utilized as tools of gentrification has become a well-known phenomenon. To quote Ronald Mauer, member of the Amsterdam city council in 2017, in newspaper Trouw: “First the artists and creatives come; their arrival attracts cafés and other establishments, and this makes the neighborhood attractive for a new kind of inhabitant. That way an entire area receives a boost.”<sup>1</sup> Theorists Jon Coaffee and Stuart Cameron have distinguished current urban regeneration as ‘third wave’ gentrification: in the so-called ‘first wave,’ the artists moved to the periphery in search of larger and affordable studio spaces, in the ‘second wave’ this art and the artist’s surrounding get turned into private commodities and in the ‘third wave’ there is a “more explicit public policy engagement and link to regeneration” taking place with an emphasis on the public consumption of art in order to give specific areas this so-called *boost*.<sup>2</sup>

As a professional artist I am of course pleased that the local city council acknowledges the importance of art. This allows opportunities for living and working in the city for artists like myself. The problem with the current system is that it offers little flexibility. The artist may live, work and create within frameworks put into place by institutions like the municipality, housing corporations and *broedplaats*-managers. An example of this problematic policy is Broedplaats Lely, where I live together with over fifty other artists.

In the year 2017, the selected artists moved into the *broedplaats*, a former school building located in the quickly developing area of Nieuw-West, near the Amsterdam Lelylaan station.

1. “Eerst komen er kunstenaars en dergelijke. Hun komst trekt horeca en andere voorzieningen. En dat maakt een buurt aantrekkelijk voor een nieuw soort bewoner. Zo kan een hele buurt een boost krijgen.” – Ronald Mauer, D66 *bestuurder*. From: Obbink, Hanne. “Broedplaatsen voor kunstenaars laten Amsterdam bruisen.”

Trouw (Amsterdam), June 11, 2017, [www.trouw.nl/nieuws/broedplaatsen-voor-kunstenaars-laten-amsterdam-bruisen-bed7b427](http://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/broedplaatsen-voor-kunstenaars-laten-amsterdam-bruisen-bed7b427).  
2. Cameron, Stuart, and Jon Coaffee. “Art, Gentrification and Regeneration: From Artist as Pioneer to Public Arts.” *International Journal of Housing Policy* 5, no. 1 (2005): 39–5.

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Part of the application procedure of the *broedplaats*-managers Urban Resort, consisted of sending in a portfolio and writing a proposal for a public program that would take place in the large auditorium of the old school building. We received a three-year contract and within this timeframe our artistic plans were expected to unfold. As soon as the construction of the surrounding area would subside the artists could make space for 'a new kind of inhabitant'; in this case middle- and higher-income residents. Even though we were all selected on the basis of our promising proposals, in actuality, very few would be executed. Every now and then the venue was used but mainly by the arts institutions that were also tenants in the building, such as De Appel Arts Centre and the electro-instrumental studio STEIM. (Recent budget cuts have led STEIM to terminate their lease at Broedplaats Lely and the future of the organization is unclear.) For individual artists the threshold somehow turned out to be too high.

The Amsterdam *broedplaats* policy was constructed in the year 2000; within the quickly developing city the initiators of the policy noticed that spaces for creative experimentation were rapidly disappearing. This policy came into place to preserve space for the low-earning 'free spirited' inhabitants so that they too could hold a space in the gentrifying city of Amsterdam. However, this format received a lot of criticism. The bureaucracy behind the policy made it too complicated for artists to establish their own *broedplaats*. In response to this, the *broedplaats* management organization, Urban Resort, was formed. Composed of a group of people with origins in the Amsterdam squatting scene but likewise possessing the required bureaucratic knowledge, they could serve as the link between municipal institutions and the artist. In this way, despite the disappearance of free-spaces, (designated spaces reserved for creative experimentation established through squatting) space for experimentation could still be safeguarded.

Yet the most important element of experimenting is perhaps the possibility of failing and in Broedplaats Lely there is little space to fail. For this city's standards, the rent per square meter in the

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building is relatively low, but for a majority of tenants, the rent amounts to over €600, - per room. To give an impression of what most artists earn; the TOZO (a temporary income support system for self-employed entrepreneurs and freelancers, set up as a result of the pandemic) of €1.050, - was quite a major relief in comparison to their standard income. Even though Broedplaats Lely is an example of relatively affordable housing, there is still little space for the artist to make mistakes. In order to cover these bills, multiple side jobs are often needed, and that does not include the costs of financing your own art. We were a selected group of individual artists, put together in a building and deemed a community. But there is no room to care for one another when you are struggling to keep your own head above water.

Surprisingly, the corona crisis changed this. The implemented restrictions did lead to most of us suddenly being unemployed, but this instability created space for solidarity, bringing us closer together. Broedplaats Lely felt like (excuse the perhaps inappropriate comparison in this case) a cruise ship offering a variety of daily activities. We started organizing our own yoga lessons, hosted movie nights and played games together, we suddenly had time to focus on art and try out new ideas, we spent time gardening and even started a compost pile. A fellow tenant stated what we were all feeling: we could temporarily and free of guilt, take time for ourselves and for our art.

As an autonomous artist you are always in search of the next project or assignment and this makes it a challenging and diverse profession. Of course, when there is financial shortage then the search for the next project can be stressful. Being self-employed means that the responsibility always falls on you; you can always do more, work harder, search further. But we could not do a thing about the corona crisis. The TOZO benefit, as mentioned earlier, was a relief for many but not everyone was eligible for this. The tenants got into contact with each other, there was talk of a rent-strike in solidarity with those who were financially affected

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the most. Our thoughts on the rent strike and how to proceed differed, but for the first time a collective movement was brought into place.

A collective email address was formed in name of the tenants, a letter was put together addressing our landlords and a representative from each wing of the building helped in writing it. The meetings suddenly drew a large attendance, in contrast to the previous meetings over the years that had been hosted by the building's managers. But I do not want to make it sound better than it is – after a couple of months the community started to crumble. Many of us went back to our side jobs, bills needed to be paid and the attendance of our gatherings started to decline. We were back to being a group of individual artists living amongst each other.

This essay is not about whether or not the proposed rent strike succeeded. For those who are curious, the answer is not really; there was no lasting strike, but the efforts did lead to a payment plan for those affected most. But this text is about what these circumstances have made clear to us. Never before had I felt so connected to my fellow tenants. During the lockdown there were two aspects that led to collective action: we had a common goal and we had time. Still, this equation lacks stability and space which led to our collective withering away just as quickly as it had been formed.

Members of a community stand up for each other, but what signifies a community is that it creates and defines itself. The tenants of Broedplaats Lely were already deemed a community, but ironically this was only actualized once its members stood up against the organization that had labeled them so. A community is not established through a top-down structure determining the frameworks through which the community can maneuver. Communities are formed through trust and in order to gain trust one needs time, space and support. In temporary living situations, like Broedplaats Lely, the inhabitants hardly get a chance

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to ground themselves. By the time the artists get to know each other and understand how they can be of use to each other and their surroundings, it will be time for them to leave.

We seem to be caught in a vicious circle. The municipality determines which projects are allowed to happen where and for how long, the *broedplaats* managers receive temporary space based on their promises to establish beautiful artist communities that will help boost the neighborhood, and the artist participates in this contest, putting into words what is expected of them in order to get through the application procedures that will grant them a space in the evermore competitive city of Amsterdam. To create sustainable connections with the city its inhabitants likewise need sustainable living and working opportunities. If the duration of a space, working conditions and participants are predetermined by an institution then that leaves no space for its members to form their own definitions, have agency or autonomy.

Communities are legitimate answers to the growing individualism of our society and preserving space for experimentation is a fantastic way to keep a city creative and diverse. However, a predefined community is an artificial community and from experimenting without failing, you are left with, at most, mediocre art.

The Dutch version of 'The Artificial Community' was awarded a basic prize in the 2020 edition of the Prijs voor Jonge Kunstcritiek (Prize for Young Art Criticism).

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# CARE-SHAPING, CARE-TAKING

STRATEGIES FOR CURATING THROUGH (AND AFTER) COVID.

By Margarita Osipian, December 2021



Aisha Madu, 'Sweep, dust, pull back'.

WE ALL BEGIN life in water

We all begin life because someone breathed for us

Until we breathe for ourselves

Someone breathes for us

Everyone has had someone—a woman—breathe for them

Until that first ga(s)p

For air

– M. NourbeSe Philip<sup>1</sup>

I was reminded of these words, this piece of text, this poem, when it echoed through the voices of Angelo Custódio and Yara Said during their participatory performance *Breathing /sites* at the Four Sisters garden, project space, labyrinth.<sup>2</sup> As I listened to these words, and re-read them again and again when I got home, I couldn't help but connect them to this text that I am writing. This text into what it was like to be a curator, to be an organiser of public programs and events, as the pandemic unfolded all around us. The words of M. NourbeSe Philip resonated with me because they carried ideas around the necessity

1. M. NourbeSe Philip, 'The Ga(s)p', in *Poetics and Precarity*, ed. Myung Mi Kim and Cristanne Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), pp.31.

2. Four Sisters: read more [foursistersproject.nl](http://foursistersproject.nl).


of support systems, of breathing for one another, of infrastructures of care.

In the midst of the pandemic I found myself (and my collaborators) rushing to find places and forms for our exhibitions and programs—live-streaming everything, transforming cancelled exhibitions into online formats, (re)embracing snail mail. Being given the space to write this text has allowed me to look back on my own work over the last months, at how things came into being and how they can inform future practices. My earlier work began in the realm of community organising around socio-political issues, not in art and culture institutions, and I try to carry those practices into what I do today. When I think about what it means to be a curator, I try to link it back to the early etymology of the word itself—a guardian; one who has care or superintendence of something. The word ‘care’, and practices of care, have been heavily permeating the conversations, exhibitions, and programming that I have been seeing take shape in the last few years, punctuated by our present (pressing) moment. This includes books like *The Delusions of Care* by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung; the Wxtch Craft cycles from the KABK Stadium Generale; Landscapes of Care from the Copenhagen Architecture Festival; Make yourself at home: radical care and hospitality from Temporary Art Platform (TAP); amongst others.

Looking back at some of the work that I have been doing during the last one and a half years, I want to explore the diversity of what curation as caretaking can mean in different contexts and how it is based on solidarity networks, or maybe on tactical alliances — but in any case, on being interdependent and caring together.

Ja Ja Ja Nee Nee Nee
Editions Podcast

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3:52:01

Listening to - The Power of Doing Nothing

Code policy

LISTENING TO - THE POWER OF DOING NOTHING

Petra Heck & Margarita Osipian  
16:00 30-05-2020

"I have been thinking about that: how sometimes we have to stop what we are doing to feel the true impact of something, to let our bodies experience that impact, the fury of an escalating injustice, a structure as well as an event; a history, an unfinished history. Sometimes to sustain your commitments you stop what you are doing." - Sara Ahmed

The idea of 'rest' itself has been commodified and sold to the overworked, the anxious, the sleep-deprived. The commodification and corporatisation of mindfulness, meditation and self-care problematise the intentions behind.




Image: Xinan - @diasporart

'Listening to - The Power of Doing Nothing', een aflevering van online radiozender Ja Ja Ja Nee Nee Nee.

## REDISTRIBUTING RESOURCES

I have a shiny silver sticker on the back of my laptop, from the Feminist Center for Creative Work that says ‘Redistribute Resources’—a constant reminder of the importance for those who have access to resources to think about how these resources are distributed. As cultural spaces began to close during the pandemic, and events and programs got cancelled, it was even more urgent to think about how those of us who still had access to resources could distribute them further. In my own work this happened most clearly at two different moments, for two projects that had already been funded by cultural subsidies.

The first was a small curatorial research project, *The Power of Doing Nothing*, that I was working on together with Petra Heck. We had received startsubsidie funding from the Stimuleringsfonds to do further curatorial research and write a funding application for the full iteration of the project, which was meant to take the form of a distributed exhibition. The pandemic, and subsequent lockdowns, happened at the moment that we were attempting to give the project more shape and form. Instead of trying to think the project into a distant and uncertain future, we decided to use the funding (most of which was previously allocated to curatorial research and writing hours) to put on two radio shows on *Ja Ja Ja Nee Nee Nee*, together with Radna Rumping, and invite the artists who we wanted to work with for the exhibition to contribute to the shows.<sup>3</sup> This allowed us to distribute the funding we had received to artists that we wanted to work with, and pay them for their contribution now (at a very financially precarious moment for many people) instead of for potential work in the future.

3. The two shows were ‘Listening to ~ the power of doing nothing’ and ‘A conversation on ~ the power of doing nothing’ which you can listen to here ([www.jajajaneeneene.com/shows/listening-to-the-power-of-doing-nothing](http://www.jajajaneeneene.com/shows/listening-to-the-power-of-doing-nothing)) and here ([www.jajajaneeneene.com/jn/shows/a-conversation-on-the-power-of-doing-nothing](http://www.jajajaneeneene.com/jn/shows/a-conversation-on-the-power-of-doing-nothing)).



The VERSO / box, a curated collection of works by local and international artists made on commission and distributed to subscribers each month.

The second instance of this was with Versal, a former art and literature journal turned independent publisher, that I am an art editor for. Led by Marly Pierre-Louis—with the support of myself and editors Megan M. Garr, Anna Arov, and Jennifer Arcuni—funding that had been received to put on a live event program was instead used to create the VERSO / box, a curated collection of work commissioned from local and international artists, packaged and delivered monthly to subscribers. This shift allowed the money, which had been reserved for a handful of events, to instead be distributed among a much larger group of artists and writers. For me, these two examples make clear the responsibility we have when we get resources to think carefully about their (re)distribution—where it is going, how is it balanced, who needs it most? This responsibility must extend beyond individual curators or organisations to make decisions about how they distribute resources. The subsidy-distributing bodies that I was in contact with, like the Stimuleringsfonds and Letterenfonds, made it clear during the pandemic that if projects had to be cancelled or postponed, it was vital that we find ways to pay artists part—or all—of their fee as soon as possible. This flexibility to shift the scope and form of a project, and the insistence on the importance of paying artists and cultural workers fairly, despite the circumstances, is something that can be taken into our post-Covid future. For example, the Fair Practice Code could potentially articulate proper contract requirements that also give artists rights to a fee for work already completed, even if a festival or exhibition is cancelled.

## PROVIDING ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE THAT IS OFTEN HIDDEN OR UNSEEN

In May of 2020, as systems of financial support for freelancers impacted by the pandemic were being put into place by the government, there was a crisis for non-EU cultural workers whose artist visas could be put into jeopardy by receiving the TOZO financial support.<sup>4</sup> This collective conversation, happening in text message threads and through word of mouth, needed to be made more visible within the cultural sector. Together with a collaborative effort from Platform BK, Salwa Foundation, and W139, we put on the first edition of the Solidarity Sessions. This first event took place inside the hybrid environment created by the group of makers who were working together through the lockdown as part of their exhibition *market*. The artists turned the exhibition into a communal working station and created the infrastructure to host a ‘public’ event for a large virtual audience very early on in the pandemic. Taking the form of an info-session and open conversation, we looked at the issues that cultural workers, independent exhibition spaces, institutions, and the webs of networks around them were facing in light of the corona-crisis. Joined by cultural workers, a lawyer, and a union representative, we shared personal stories, practical information about possible legal pitfalls in obtaining government support, and made visible what different organisations and platforms were doing to support cultural workers during this particularly precarious moment. The feeling of empowerment that this event generated, through the sharing of knowledge, and the sense of ‘togetherness’ that was felt at a time where people were particularly lonely and alienated from one another, should not be forgotten as we move into (hopefully) less precarious circumstances.

4. You can read more about the full situation as it was happening, as outlined by immigration lawyer Jeremy Bierbach, on the website of Franssen Advocaten: [www.franssenadvocaten.nl/english/tozo-and-self-employed-residence-permit-holders-the-latest-summary](http://www.franssenadvocaten.nl/english/tozo-and-self-employed-residence-permit-holders-the-latest-summary).



The first Solidarity Sessions in W1.39, during the exhibition market. ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHfwtTtesfo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHfwtTtesfo)).

Another initiative that emerged during the pandemic, but had been conceptualised much earlier than that, is DIWAN for Arts and Dialogue, a platform co-initiated by Fadwa Naamna, Hilda Moucharrafiéh, Ehsan Fardjadniya, Emirhan Akin, and myself. The aim of DIWAN is to support cultural workers, especially those in the diaspora, in the development of their projects and artistic practices—tackling the collective struggles of residency permits, housing, and project funding, amongst others. The first DIWAN event was aimed at mapping and understanding the particular urgencies and issues that postgraduate artists and cultural workers confront in the first years after their graduation. In an informal and collective setting, we invited people to share their own experiences, with the belief that openly sharing and discussing these struggles can be an effective tool to navigate and confront our challenges, while supporting one another. With DIWAN, and these other initiatives, it is about looking at all the different layers and infrastructures that support and bring cultural programming into being—artist visa support, affordable studios and housing, fair fees for cultural workers, subsidised education—and not only that which manifests visibly at the moment of an exhibition, an opening, a public event. In these cases the Covid crisis—which exacerbated and made visible precarious circumstances—was the catalyst of initiatives that will extend well beyond the present moment.

DIWAN  
talks

Residence Permit for Self-employed Artists

**In an open-for-public consultation with** *Fill in capital letters*

1.1 Name of immigration lawyer NIKKI VREEDE

1.2 Date 1 2 0 2 0 1 C T O B E R 2 0 2 1

1.3 Location ON ZOOM

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/82326148987>  
*link in bio*

1.4 Join us at 1 6 0 0 until 1 7 3 0

**Prepare the following**

Laptop or smartphone

Stable Internet connection

Questions for your case or for the case of a friend who does not have one or both of the above

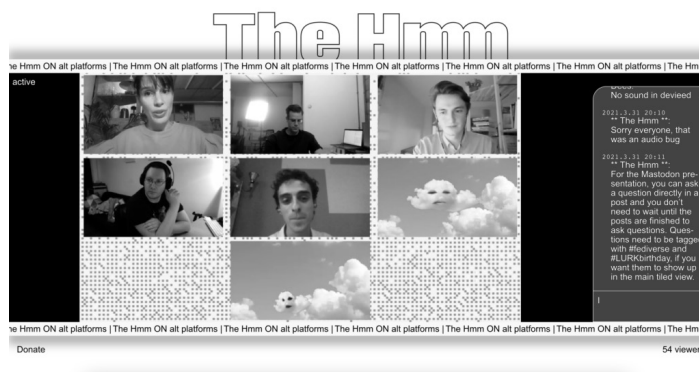
**Signature** DIWAN FOR ARTS AND DIALOGUE  
*in collaboration with the W139 artistic core group (2021-2023)*

Announcement of the third DIWAN Talks in W139.

## ON THE AGILITY OF SMALLNESS

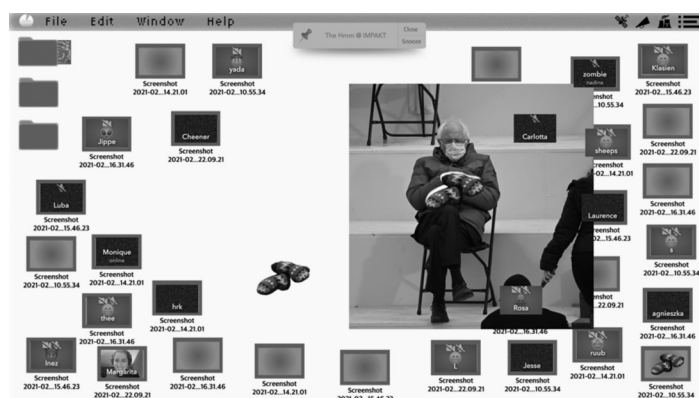
During the pandemic, particularly with my work with The Hmm, a platform for internet cultures, I was busier than ever. With The Hmm, our events were focused on bringing online culture offline and to a physical space. Once we could no longer be together in a physical space, me and my colleague Lilian Stolk had to think about what it meant to be online together, reflecting on internet cultures, when everyone was exhausted from being online. We knew how to welcome our guests and our audience in a physical space, but how does this manifest online? Rather than focus on the limitations of being in an online space, we started to think about its potentialities. In our first experiment we did an edition of The Hmm where we jumped from one platform to another (from Twitch to Jitsi to Zoom), with a different speaker on each platform—researching what the best platform was for cultural events. It turned out it was none of them, so together with Hackers & Designers we built a shared livestream platform, away from the extractive practices of Big Tech.<sup>5</sup>

5. The code for the livestream platform is available on Github and we setup a MIT license for its use: [www.github.com/hackersanddesigners/the-hmm-livestream](https://www.github.com/hackersanddesigners/the-hmm-livestream).



Screenshot of The Hmm on Alternative Platforms, livestreamed on their self-built platform (in collaboration with Hackers & Designers).

We did tours through alternative platforms like Mozilla Hubs and Ethercalc, and had a hybrid event at MU where our physical guests were linked together with virtual buddies. We learned about the extra time, care, and communication we need to put in in order to make a successful online event, but also about the potentialities that are inherent in the online space. Being online allowed us to welcome speakers and an audience from all over the world, which we were not able to do with our small budget for physical events. Online events also allow people who normally would not be able to join a physical event, for whatever reason, to take part. With increasingly sophisticated closed captioning technologies, online events can be more accessible than their physical counterparts.



Screenshot of The Hmm at IMPACT in a Ohay Hangout Room.

Finally, in the process of organising events with The Hmm, we learned the value of being a tiny organisation. Because of our small size we were able to respond more quickly to the changing conditions created by the pandemic, and we were able to be



more flexible and agile in collaboratively creating our experimental online spaces away from Big Tech. To me, this period with The Hmm signalled how care manifests in the spaces we build to be together with one another (that our data does not have to be extracted to take part in an online event); in how we communicate with our audience and speakers (doing a lot of tech tests, having moderators for the chat and the speakers, sending clear event info emails); and in continuing to work with hybrid events because of the accessibility they offer to a wider audience.<sup>6</sup>



Screenshot of The Hmm  
@ Not A Playground.

## INFRASTRUCTURES OF CARE

In the summer of 2019, I was in Belarus in Minsk (where I was born) with my parents and my partner. We spent an entire day going from one graveyard to another, cleaning the gravestones of my grandparents, great grandparents, uncles, aunts. What resonated with me was this notion of taking care, of sweeping, dusting, pulling back the plants that have overgrown—this work of intergenerational maintenance. And so again I go back to these infrastructures of care; to see care, support, and solidarity with one another as something that is active. As something that needs to be maintained, by institutions, organisations, and communities. As something that we need to feel a deep sense of responsibility for, but also hold one another accountable for. For me, curating is a practice that takes into account everything around the exhibition itself—the infrastructures of financial

6. See The Remote Access Archive project for an online archive of the ways disabled people have used remote access before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: [www.mapping-access.com/the-remote-access-archive](http://www.mapping-access.com/the-remote-access-archive).

support, the organisational structures within institutions, the support systems available for cultural workers. How do the structures that we're embedded within, and which we sustain and shape, reflect on the questions that we are engaging with? How do we sweep, dust, pull back the overgrown plants?

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# FURTHER READING

## REMOTE WORK? DEMAND DIAL-UP

- Ruth Schwartz Cowan 'More Work For Mother: The Ironies Of Household Technology From The Open Hearth To The Microwave', Basic Books, 2nd edition, 1985
- John Seely Brown, 'The Coming Age of Calm Technology', re:form, 11 August 2014

## HOW PRECARIOUS IS WORKING IN THE CULTURAL SECTOR?

- De gedragscode voor de culturele en creatieve sector | Fair Practice Code, [www.fairpracticecode.nl/nl#block-fpc-menu](http://www.fairpracticecode.nl/nl#block-fpc-menu)
- 'How much does a hero earn?', Platform BK, 20 May 2020, [www.platformbk.nl/en/how-much-does-a-hero-earn](http://www.platformbk.nl/en/how-much-does-a-hero-earn)

## CARE-SHAPING, CARE-TAKING

- Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, 'The Delusions of Care', Archive Books, 2021
  - 'Wxtch Craft' (zine), KABK, 2020-2021, [www.kabk.nl/studium-generale/wxtchcraft](http://www.kabk.nl/studium-generale/wxtchcraft)
  - The Care Collective, 'The care Manifesto', [www.versobooks.com/books/3706-care-manifesto](http://www.versobooks.com/books/3706-care-manifesto)
  - 'Tijdelijke Overbruggingsregeling Zelfstandige Ondernemers (Tozo)', nieuwsbericht, 20 maart 2020, [www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/03/25/nieuwsbericht-tozo-zelfstandig-ondernemers](http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/03/25/nieuwsbericht-tozo-zelfstandig-ondernemers) (only in Dutch)
  - 'Jitsi? Zoom? Twitch? We set out to find the best platform for online cultural events', The Hhm, Dossier 1: Quarantine Edition, 7 May 2020, [www.thehmm.nl/jitsi-zoom-twitch-we-set-out-to-find-the-best-platform-for-online-cultural-events/](http://www.thehmm.nl/jitsi-zoom-twitch-we-set-out-to-find-the-best-platform-for-online-cultural-events/)
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**PRECARIOUS PRACTICES READER**

Artists and cultural workers on the reality  
of precarious life

Authors: Alina Lupu, Silvio Lorusso, Maisa Imamović,  
Thijs Lijster, Claartje Rasterhoff, Bjorn Schrijen,  
Claire van der Mee en Margarita Osipian  
Editing: Sepp Eckenhaussen and Koen Bartijn  
Foreword: Sepp Eckenhaussen  
Coordination and production: Martina Denegri  
Design: Studio Bas Koopmans (brand identity)  
and Nuno Beijinho (reader)

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by Felix van der Vorst and Hannah Vernier.

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**CONTACT**

Vereniging Platform Beeldende Kunst  
Da Costakade 158  
1053 XC Amsterdam  
info@platformbk.nl

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