

One on one meetings, performances and hangovers

Report on IETM's Autumn Plenary Meeting, Ghent, 4-7 October 2007

On the invitation of IETM, arts curator and writer Ivo Stevenheydens participated in IETM's Autumn Plenary Meeting in Ghent. This being his first time at a Plenary Meeting, he chose not to write a dry report on the meeting, but rather a personal trajectory. In Ghent from Thursday to Sunday, Stevenheydens wrote a very subjective, chronological report on the different activities that he took part in.

Only one month before the start of the meeting I register myself. A number of days later I get a message telling me that I am registered for the online community. After some piddling with the password, a couple of days later I succeed to log in to vooruit.be/oneonone. In the community, subscribers can, amongst other things, upload their photograph, compose a personal calendar and say hello to the other members. A day before the start of the meeting I check the web community again with aroused curiosity. A disappointment: only a few participants have updated their profile online. But let's admit it: I am also guilty of this. So at the very last moment, I decide to set the right example. Strangely enough I am registered as 'artist', although I am mainly active as a programmer and researcher – two of the options from which one can choose online; combining them is unfortunately not possible – and also as a journalist. I find it very funny that while logging in online you can choose between 'single', 'in a relationship' and even 'swinger' – the option I cross, just for fun. While doing this, I also select the "blind date" option. The system will calculate a perfect match for me. Is this a joke? Are they serious? Anyway: I am in this to play the game, so I add a picture that is kind of mysterious, only showing my shadow. I am very curious what this will lead to in Ghent...

Not only the international nature of the meeting is astonishing, I am also surprised by the fact that other cities present performances and other activities as part of a so called 'Off programme'. During the days preceding the happening, invitation e-mails to see performances in Ghent are flowing into my mailbox, followed by invitations to Brussels, Antwerp and Roubaix. In these cases, the organisers spoil their public: shuttles in between the cities are always planned. As a newcomer, the number of activities offered seems excessive. Meeting points, meeting groups, city walks, working groups, learning cells, info cells, body practices, brainstorm, etc.: what do they mean and what is the difference between them? And this is only what a look at the daytime programme reveals, because IETM 'One on One' also has a performance schedule that mainly takes place in the evenings, but also includes installations and performances that happen during the daytime. I find it impossible to make a plan for this meeting beforehand. Nevertheless, I decide in advance to take part in the New Members and Newcomers' Welcome on Thursday, in order to discover what I should expect from the meeting.

Whilst considering my schedule it suddenly strikes me that earlier, in an email four or five days ago, IETM had informed us that in Ghent a printed programme would not be available for distribution. We had to print it ourselves, that was also the message. Thank you for your ecological awareness! Would this lead to chaos or would everyone would be very prepared, having gone through the programme, researching on its components, critically deciding what's hot and not and effectively registering for all the sessions in which they wanted to participate? And will we still be able to fit in informal meetings – one of the most important features of this event – with such tightly packed agendas? Sigh. Okay. Just to be sure, I make around eight reservations for very diverse activities. After all, I do feel a slight fear of the void of an open

agenda in Ghent. Plus I don't want to arrive in the city completely unprepared. What if all the others are totally organised? After my reservations are made, the website has a handy 'FREE! Print your own calendar' button. Unfortunately the printout itself only lists the name of the activity and the day. Other essential information, like the address and the exact time, is missing.

On Thursday I arrive at Vooruit around one in the afternoon. On the first floor, right above the café, an excited atmosphere rules. A lot of people shake each other's hands, even more kiss and hug hello. I seem to have arrived at the peak moment: most participants are also just entering Vooruit in order to take part in one of the variety of sessions scheduled at two in the afternoon. On the landings between the Brug- and Balzaal and on the lower level of the café, a sort of lounge is arranged. Black leather armchairs invite us to comfortably catch up with each other's stories. In the Balzaal, lime green chairs and carpets are the fresh decor of what is supposed to be the physical heart of the meeting: the night meeting point, where you can also have a snack or drink during the daytime. In the rest of the rooms, lime green accents are also present; it seems to be the colour of 'One On One' (later somebody told me that lime and pink have been IETM colours for a while).

On the lower level, long tables serve as a place for an ocean of flyers, brochures, leaflets, programmes, CDs and DVDs of diverse companies, artists, promoters, organisers, artists and cultural houses: also here an overload of information. I decide not to take anything with me. At this moment, in the Brugzaal a bunch of people are queuing at the registration desk. Some of them are a little bit annoyed; their registration hasn't happened yet or – worse – still has to be paid for. Others get slightly bad tempered, just because they have to wait for a moment. For me it is all cool: in scarcely ten minutes I have my pass and I am ready to go. I get a welcome pack. In an utterly ugly grey bag there is the printed programme (I knew it! Well, actually the information is not as complete as online, but at least it is synoptic – and in lime green), an oversized ballpoint, a list of the participants at the meeting and a bundle of brochures from the sponsors.

After I have run into some old familiar faces – “aah, you are also here? Why?” – I head for the foyer of the Domzaal where the learning session 'Beyond the Maps' is about to start. Speaker Virginie Raisson makes, together with a team of collaborators, the Arte- television programme 'Le Dessous des Cartes', a short series wherein a region or territory is analysed by means of different maps. Off-screen, accompanied by images of cartographic representations the presenter Jean-Christophe Victor unravels historical and geopolitical issues of a given region in a slightly essayistic way. Virginie Raisson talks not only about the positive aspects of maps, but mainly about the misuse of them. We all know it: besides their utilitarian, communicative, artistic or representative functions these instruments to understand, measure and inform also have very dangerous limits. Maps are – especially when a professional cartographer does not make them – always a selection, a simplification of reality. Maps are never objective: they have a maker and a reader, people who interpret subjectively. The ways in which scale, legend etc. are represented and interpreted will always give a deformed image. Or as cartographer Raisson puts it herself: “We always have to remember that a map is a lie.” After this rather general conclusion, Raisson focuses in on the types of representation of religion in cartography, interlarded with tens of examples. Representations of Islam after 9/11 in 'objective' maps are especially taken into consideration. In this discussion, we eagerly go beyond cartography, speaking of “statistical data that is not reliable”, and the problem that it is actually hard to pin down Islam as a religion, especially nowadays. In extreme examples of recent maps, Islam often stands for a mixture of political, religious and terrorist information.

“Religion is never the problem of conflict,” continues Raisson, “It is often the fuel of it instead of the reason.” These ideas kick-start an animated and interesting discussion amongst the participants, about the currently very popular subjective mapping, and the way we perceive Islam in western society. Unfortunately we are missing the presence of real specialists in both fields, making the discussion turn in rounds. Our learning session wisely ends half an hour early.

But I don't have time to grab a drink or chat with some of the people that were also in this Learning Session! In the meantime the New Members and Newcomers' Welcome has already started. As I enter the Emiel Studio at Vooruit, Milan Lucic (director of Cultural Center Dom

Omladine, Belgrade) and Roger Christmann (manager of KunstenFESTIVALdesarts, Brussels), both IETM Board Members are already answering the participants' questions. I don't really have the chance to learn at this moment what IETM and this meeting is all about – after all I have entered the space too late – but I am sure that the next few days will make that more clear. And hey, these people have a nice surprise for us: champagne on the house for all the fresh members and the others in the room.

But still and again, there is not a lot of time. Because in the meantime, more drinks are already waiting in the City Hall, ten minutes down the road from Vooruit. In the spacious and beautiful late-gothic reception room of the town hall – a connoisseur tells me it is constructed in flamboyant Flemish gothic – we are welcomed with drinks and appetizers. An orchestra featuring Dick van der Harst and other members of LOD is playing half absurd, half touchy music – twisted fragments of the Smurfs mixed with samples of Bach. Alderman of Culture, Tourism and Parties (a combination like that can only be typically Belgian) Lieven Decaluwé welcomes the many participants present; a rather excited crowd that is hard to silence. Decaluwé plays his promoting role with passion and brio: his speech name-drops well known creative people from Ghent, from the middle ages up till now, stating that Ghent was and is a very creative city. "We are all young in Ghent and we stay young," he concludes. Next up is Katrien Laporte, long-term member of IETM.

She regrets that she's no longer part of the IETM Daily Board and also stresses the potency of Ghent as a creative scene for the future. IETM Secretary General, Mary Ann DeVlieg, also has a confession to make: though this meeting we will all celebrate IETM's 25th Anniversary, the organisation is actually 26 years old. To celebrate, Hilde Teuchies, ex- Secretary General of IETM and now from LOD and Crew, is offered a bronze medal by the city. Afterwards, we get more promo talk on Ghent from Serge Platel, director of Festival van Vlaanderen (a festival for classical and world music plus dance, happening in Ghent and Brussels), and then we are able to go on drinking, talking, meeting and laughing. I have an unusual, funny and very interesting chat with Jez Colborne of Mind the Gap, a disability related theatre company from Bratford, UK. Ten members of Mind the Gap are attending the meeting in Ghent. Sharing a cigarette on the stairs of the city hall, Jez tells me about his trip through America, together with the theatre director Tim Wheeler. They made the crossing on a bike – a Harley – on route 66 in October 2004. Their experiences led to the piece, 'On the Verge' that Jez also made the music for, and which was performed in 2006 in the UK, but also internationally, going as far as Beijing. Jez is amazed by the architecture in Ghent. As he has a passionate interest in emergency vehicle sirens, we start to guess where they might be hiding in the old city centre, and what the town would sound like if they were put into action...

After – and during – the reception, flocks of people leave: the performance programme is strictly timed, others go for dinner. I do the latter and meet some people afterwards again in Vooruit for a last chat and a nightcap. Unluckily, in the bar of Vooruit there is a concert, which leads to the situation that not a lot of the IETMers are in the night meeting point Balzaal. Instead they are mingled with the other people in the spacious bar, which makes it hard to separate unfamiliar IETM faces from the general public. Anyway, I decide not to stay too long: the schedule for tomorrow looks even busier.

Friday morning: around 300 people are packed into the Theaterzaal at Vooruit and are waiting for the Plenary Discussion & Extraordinary General Assembly. Officially starting at ten, people filter in during the different presentations. We kick off with a Happy Birthday letter from Judith Knight of ArtsAdmin, one of the oldest member organisations of IETM. Stefaan De Ruyck, General Director of Vooruit welcomes us to Ghent, followed by a noisy performance by Japanese performer Tomomi Adachi. A lot of people are surprised by the harsh noises he makes with his sensor shirt – especially at this early hour. Having worked with sound and multimedia art for years, I find this short intermezzo a little bit has-been and start wishing I'd stayed in bed. After Adachi leaves us be again, Elke van Campenhout, who compiled the daily programme together with IETM and Vooruit, makes an introduction and welcomes Rob van Kranenburg for his keynote lecture. Van Kranenburg, accompanied by images and citing richly from historic and more recent events, critically discusses our relationship with technology, ~~on~~ our position in today's hybrid space ('beyond cyberspace') and ~~on~~ the theme of this meeting,

'One on One'. IETM's intention is that Kranenburg's statement should kickstart discussions amongst the participants, but in spite of his lively speech the subject is never touched upon again in the next couple of days – well, at least not amongst my company.

Next, the Finnish Virve Suutinen, the new President of IETM, invites us to reflect on the future of IETM and of the performing arts, recalling the role of IETM in the performing arts in the past. Afterwards, we are treated to another 'surreal Belgian moment': two notaries are supposed to be there in order to officially check the changes in the statutes of IETM, and whether they are correctly voted in. A little bit strange: we all had to wait as the businessmen arrived late. But afterwards it was official: the statutes were changed and we could continue the celebration of this informal organisation.

After a quick lunch, I decide to start my afternoon in a more light-hearted way and I head to the nearby Shoppingcenter Zuid to catch 'Magna Plaza', a performance by the Ghent/ Rotterdam based collective, Wunderbaum. Loosely based on 'Dolls', a film by Japanese Takeshi Kitano, 'Magna Plaza' tells the story of a boy waiting for his girlfriend, who will never show up. Since it is a weekday afternoon and the activity of the shopping centre carries on as usual, the audience – seated on two levels of this capitalist paradise – is wearing headphones. Only we can hear exactly what the performers are saying as they move strangely, pose, and run around the shopping mall, whilst a lot of the shoppers, lunchers, coffee drinkers and other mall rats are looking, pointing and asking questions about what the hell is-going on. Wunderbaum also draws passers-by into the performance, asking them to help hold objects, whether they have a cell phone to be borrowed etc. The nice thing is that most of the time these helping hands don't have the slightest clue that they are part of the performance, which gives the situation a hint of 'Candid Camera', albeit it in a more human, serious format. Over and above the dialogues or the storyline, 'Magna Plaza' is especially enjoyable because of this interaction between spectators and shoppers, which works both ways (we are also a strange sight, our little group of seated headphone-wearing concentrating viewers) and because of the unusual location of a shopping centre where, if you take your time, a lot of everyday life stories and human interaction could be observed. After the performance, I flock together with some other spectators, who all seem to be working for cultural organisations in France. I learn first hand about the functioning of the Roberto Cimetta Fund and how ONDA, l'Office National de Diffusion Artistique keeps in touch with millions of artists, creators, theatres, funders etc.

Later in the afternoon, I pick up the city walk through Ghent and its cultural hotspots, which has already started. Knowing Ghent like the back of my hand – I studied in the city and lived there for about ten years – I am curious to participate in the City Walks, announced as 'A tourist tour for theatre lovers'. On the one hand I want to see if I can discover new corners of the city, and on the other hand I secretly want to see whether the places shown are the ones I am expecting. I wonder if this will resemble the way I would present artistic Ghent to somebody unknown. Actually, the tour passes by spots like city theatre NTGent and the dance studio of Les Ballets C. de la B, which is still being constructed. Thanks to the radiant autumn sun, the tour was not only a captivating tour of Ghent, but also a highly enjoyable one.

In the evening, I go to see 'Über' in NTGent, a performance by the Dutch Sanne van Rijn staged in an old set by Anna Viebrock: the one Christoph Marthaler used for Pessoa's 'Faust, Eine subjektive Tragödie' in 1992. Though some audience members were sighing throughout the performance, I very much enjoy Van Rijn's typical mixture of absurd situations, irony, feelings of unheimlichkeit and stage interventions, set at a slow pace, resulting in a tension that makes the audience highly aware of the staged, theatrical situation. After 'Über' I am lucky enough to meet Van Rijn, who is happier with the performance this time: earlier she played it in spring in Vooruit's Concertzaal in the frame of the Ghent 'Time Festival'.

After the performance and a quick bite – plus discussions with performance-makers about the role of hiphop in contemporary dance and its influence on socio-political matters – I head for Vooruit again. Tonight, there are no special activities happening in the bar, but still a lot of IETMers find the comfort of this spacious location more tempting than the rather dark and boring meeting point of Balzaal. I head straight to the bar and run into a Scandinavian bunch. Amazed at the cheap Belgian beer prices, they tell me about the position of artists in their respective

countries and the problems they encounter in their different practices. It soon gets late – too late – and indeed the beers are cheap in Ghent...

The day after, I feel slightly sick – was it the overdose of drinks last night, the early symptoms of flu, or the onset of fatigue due to this busy schedule? Well, probably a mixture. I decide to skip a big part of the morning and stay working in the hotel.

Taking it more lightly again, I go and check out some performances in Vooruit and Backstage. A good idea, since the keywords here seem to be interaction, relaxation and fun. Highly enjoyable is 'Nemo Observatorium', an installation by the Belgian Lawrence Malstaf. The visitor is invited to take a seat in an easy chair situated in the middle of a big plastic tube. Four motors drive millions of little styrofoam elements around you in the tube, creating a tornado that has a dazzling, psychedelic effect. Even more personal ('One on One?') is 'Drop a Line' by Heine R. Avdal, one of the three members of the Brussels-based company Deepblue. We are invited for a cup of tea and a strange looking green cookie in a setting that balances in between Japanese tearoom, laboratory and fluxus performance happening. On 'stage' people are engaged in slow, weird actions. A little bit scary, but also very funny: someone is torturing a cello making harsh noises, two others are slowly, ritually moving around the performance space. This place, partly covered with tufts of dried moss also leads to three private 'stages' where one can register for another 'One on One' performance. Actually, the 'Box with Holes' is incorporated into the performance: in a small room a voice on a headphone speaks half nonsensical words, inviting you to put your hands in the holes of a box. What you get is a good scare, and finally a sensual, stimulating massage with essential oils.

Totally recovered after this, I am ready to take part in 'IETM Talks and Listens': small working groups where Board Members explain the meaning of IETM and – predominantly – listen to comments. "How should we rethink the learning and working formats of the meetings?", "What is upsetting you about the practice of your profession or cultural environment?" or "How should we collaborate with the rest of the world?" are some of the pertinent questions that need to be discussed. Seated at a table with people from Helsinki, Ghent, Montréal, Belgrade, Tokyo and Amsterdam, we start slowly at first, but gradually vivid and rich discussion emerges about the role and future of IETM. This is personally my most intense moment of 'One on One'; a moment where everybody is effectively open and that gives us all the feeling that IETM is not an organisation dominated by a Board of a few people, but rather an open platform where everybody's opinion matters. Refreshing.

After this, I want to try another 'One on One' performance: 'O_Rex' by Eric Joris and Crew. Unfortunately, the team have problems with the technology they are using, which they decide is too unstable at this time to give a quality performance, so instead we could go for 'U_Raging Standstill', another piece by the same company. But – oh disaster! – this performance is more than fully booked; even the waiting list seems impossibly long.

Well, a drink and a chat at the bar can be just as good, if not better, than interactive theatre experiences. I squeeze myself in at a table where an international crew of IETMers are chatting. Some of them I already know and I am introduced to Semolina Tomic from L'Antic Theatre, Barcelona, who has been having some trouble finding multimedia artists for her upcoming production. I guess I might be able to help her with some contacts, so we swap cards – one of the most common actions during this IETM meeting.

Some minutes later that evening, Hans Van Den Broeck's Cie Soit performs 'En Servicio'. Very nice piece, extremely well danced, beautiful captured stage views. Top notch. But not all that much my cup of tea...

And then: party! In the evening, we are in great numbers in the Balzaal (finally some people in there!) for the end of the 'One on One' celebration, as well as the 25th Anniversary celebration party of the 26 year old IETM. Photos of all the earlier meetings are projected on a huge screen in the back of the Balzaal, provoking "oohs" and "aahs" of recognition amongst some of the folk. And then: on the other side of the room a very sexy voice saying 'Happy Birthday, IETM' (was it you Mary Ann?), curtains slowly opening, not to reveal another

performance, but three massive cakes with fireworks on them. The cakes are attacked, the music goes up and we dance until five in the morning. I launch a form of back-to-back dancing, which I hope everybody enjoys (at least I remember good reactions at that point!).

Sunday starts just like Saturday with a storm in my head. Probably again this is mixture of hangover and illness, although the former is more likely considering what happened at the party last night. "I feel like frozen pizza", as I discuss the right description of all our shared feelings with some newly met IETMers. In Vooruit, we are treated to a copious brunch. Fresh fruit, yoghurt and plenty of coffee do the trick: slowly we are getting better. "Welcome, you 300 sleeping people with coffee cups," laughs Mary Ann De Vlieg. She gives us a short goodbye speech, followed by organisers from Tokyo, Ljubljana and Zürich, places that will host upcoming IETM meetings.

Now, what have I learned from these four days? Well, the blind date that the online community promised, I have seen nothing of. I did not get a lot of the theme of the meeting either. I am a little bit frustrated too, because there were so many things to do, that I have doubts about whether I skipped or caught the excellent ones. On the other hand I met lots of extremely creative, enthusiastic, energetic and, above all, sweet people from vast parts of Europe and the world. It is reassuring to know that an organiser in Montréal has to cope with the same problems as I have in the Benelux. It is good to find common solutions. It is also good to collaborate on a longer term basis. But for that, we will have to see... This was only my first meeting. Anyway, the sparkling, motivating, inspiring and fun discussions I had, with a glass of wine in hand, were the perfect gift IETM could give me during these four days of 'One on One'.

This article was prepared by Ive Stevenheydens especially for IETM. The views and opinions expressed are those of the author and do not represent those of IETM.