



IETM REPORT

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# CAN THE SHOW GO ON?

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**Flanders**  
State of the Art



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# Can the show go on?

The session 'Can the show go on?' debated local cultural 'ecosystems' and the way festivals fit into these ecosystems. Are they catalysts of further artistic activity, do they play a role in attracting new audiences or do they rather occupy funding and creative territories that limit the perspectives of other cultural initiatives?

Through concrete experiences in Berlin, Barcelona and Glasgow, the session challenged the audience in thinking what a 'perfect' cultural ecosystem should be, and what partnerships were needed to strengthen all actors, giving them the appropriate means and space to flourish.

The discussion was moderated by Jordi Pascual, Coordinator of the Committee on Culture of the world association United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) that grounds its activities in the Agenda 21 for culture.

Three speakers introduced and animated the session with a presentation of their work, and the way they positioned themselves in the local environment.



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**Moderator:**

Jordi Pascual - [United Cities and Local Governments](#), Spain

**With:**

Virve Sutinen - [Tanz im August Festival/Hebbel am Ufer](#), Germany

Kim Simpson - [SHIET](#), United Kingdom

Gaston Core - [Hiroshima](#), Spain

## Berlin

Virve Sutinen, Artistic Director of the **Tanz im August Festival**, opened the debate with a presentation of her background and of the festival she is currently running.

Long standing member, former board member and former president of IETM, Virve Sutinen has been working in the cultural sector for many years. She started her activities in Finland, her home country, before moving to Stockholm and then Berlin.

Tanz im August Festival is the international contemporary dance festival of Berlin. The objective of the festival is to inspire and connect the local dance scene to the rest of the world, engage new audiences and contribute to the development of the local and global scenes. The festival presents 20 to 25 companies each year in different venues. It co-produces 2 to 4 new works each year. In 2016, 17000 tickets were sold, which corresponds to a 95% occupation.

For Virve Sutinen, healthy cultural ecosystems have to respond to local needs, and therefore vary greatly from city to city. A healthy cultural life always goes hand in hand, however, with a healthy society. It is also very much tied to the political environment.

In her opinion, Berlin is a real 'city of culture', proud of its cultural heritage and of its institutions. As it is still in the state of 'becoming', and therefore still evolving, vivid discussions about the cultural institutions are taking place. In Berlin, citizens have not turned into 'spectators' but are actively participating in the debates. They care about their institutions, and want to have their say, for example, on directors' appointments, which would rarely happen in other cities.

## Barcelona

The second speaker, Gaston Core, is the Artistic Director of **Hiroshima**, an independent art space located in an old elevator factory, downtown of Barcelona. The aim of this new venue, that opened its doors one and a half year ago, is the promotion and exhibition of the contemporary arts scene and of new art forms in general. It presents both emergent and consolidated artists (local, national and international) and receives the support of many foreign national institutes based in Barcelona. It reaches out to 'non theatrical' audiences through a 'sexy' communication, a singular location, and the fact that it can offer a 'medium space' that was lacking in the city.

For Gaston Core, a 'healthy' cultural ecosystem strikes the right balance between the audience and the artists, the institutional and the independent, the production and the number of performances (many new productions are shown only once). In Gaston Core's opinion, fighting the 'crowding out effect' is often necessary: sometimes the increasing participation of governments leads to the withdrawing of private initiatives.

In Barcelona, festivals have become a model of cultural consumption. There are over 175 festivals per year in the city, around 20 of them engaged with theatre and dance. Of those 20, only one reaches out to more than 5000 spectators. A large majority of the festivals has a very reduced audience.

## United Kingdom

The third speaker, Kim Simpson, is the Creative Director of **Shift**. Based in Glasgow, this independent producer works on productions and programmes for a variety of festivals. She also runs cooperation projects. Among many others, two key projects can be mentioned: the Red Shoes immersive performance shown at Tramway in 2013, and the Lab workshop held in Edinburgh in August 2012.

In Glasgow the 1990 European Capital of Culture had a great impact on the local cultural scene. Today, however, the live performance community is lacking space to present its work, especially big scale works, as the Arches closed down and Tramway became a dance-focused venue. There is also an ongoing need for very small, easy to access grants and for funding streams that would make it possible to support risk taking over a longer term. More advocacy on public benefit is also needed (but not coming from the artists), as well as a continued recognition of diversity (emergent and recognised artists, gender, artists with disability, etc.).

## Discussions

Following those presentations, the 'raison d'être' of festivals and their impact on local cultural contexts were then discussed in-depth by the audience and the speakers, addressing a number of key issues.

First of all, it was underlined that audience development had to be the **collective responsibility** of both the cultural players and the politicians through the diversification of the offer and the development of relevant communication strategies.

Festivals are indeed often created to fill in a 'programming' gap, supporting the development of a specific cultural stream that, with time, finds its audience and receives institutionalised support. Some festivals therefore need to disappear when the art form it promoted becomes mainstream.

In other contexts, festivals function with a very limited audience (mostly of professionals who use those events to meet and discover new works), which can create or **reinforce a distance between the general public and the artists**. It is then difficult to get people to pay to see the work of new artists, and the relation with the seasonal programming and the local scene is also challenged.

In many cities, cultural 'events' of all sorts are now called 'festivals', and therefore create an artificial competition between venues and programming streams. **Competition** can also emerge when festivals and artists have to apply to the same production grants.

In a 'sustainable ecosystem', seasons and festivals should not be competing, as they pursue different objectives that are most of the time complementary: festivals attract new audiences, offer PR opportunities to politicians; a visibility that can then benefit to the venues and their seasonal programming. A cultural ecosystem can therefore only see the light in cities where a coherent cultural policy is implemented, offering the **right funding tools** and supporting the **right synergies** in the local cultural scene.

In many local contexts, the **economic model** of festivals is still to be developed, as it does not attract enough audience and cannot pay artists in a satisfactory way. Communication and marketing in these cases have to be improved, as well as the sustainability of the engagement with the local cultural scene in between events.

Different tools can be envisaged for a better and more sustainable engagement with the audience such as the 'packaging' of the communication for certain events (a 'glossy' magazine to attract a new audience) or the organisation of other types of activities next to the main programming (a retrospective of the work of a famous artist, artists' talks, educational programmes, etc.).

A sustainable cultural ecosystem also demands an engagement with a large variety of stakeholders, including **civic initiatives** (as it is the case in the Cabanyal neighbourhood in Valencia) and a reflection on the governance of the cultural institutions in a given environment.

Finally, it was agreed that festivals and venues had to work together on 'risk' (around an artist, a company, an exhibition), as people are more likely to take 'risks' and discover new artists/pieces of work during a festival than in the context of a season. Institutions have therefore a role to play in giving visibility to independent projects developed in parallel programming streams. It is also the role of curators to know well and keep an eye on the development of the local ecosystem in order to help to the emergence of new artists, rather than using more rigid tools such as 'open calls'.



Stage set up at Tanz im August Festival 2016 © Alexander Krupp