

Fieldwork in an Artistic Research collaboration

Thinking with chocolate Easter eggs

My contribution to the Hybrid Labs Symposium consists of an introduction to my fieldwork with a group of theater artists in an artistic research project called '*Buren & Bagage [Neighbours & Baggage]*'. The project is the first, two-year part of a four-year artistic research on the theme of '*Productieve Grenzen [Productive Borders]*'. The artistic research is funded by the Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross border cooperation and Mobility (ITEM), which is an interdisciplinary research institute of Zuyd University of Applied Sciences and Maastricht University in The Netherlands. The project is carried out by the Dutch theatre company Het Laagland in collaboration with the Research Centre for arts, autonomy and the public sphere of Zuyd.

The project-initiator defines two aims for *Buren & Bagage* (Het Laagland, 2018). Content-wise, the project deals with research of everyday border conduct. That is: ways in which people live with and experience borders in the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion, the region where the borders of The Netherlands, Belgium and Germany meet. The second aim is methodological. The project is practice-based. Notions of what artistic research is and might be are developed in situ, taking into consideration the local specificity of knowledge. The project brief continues to explain that no positive results of cultural activities are presupposed. Instead, the question what relevant roles cultural actors might develop within the Euroregion is taken as a starting point (Het Laagland, 2018). This way, an experimental approach is taken to conducting artistic research. The artist's practice is simultaneously method and object in the research process.

Buren & Bagage's second objective closely links to my research aim. My research aim is to explore the influence of (tacit) assumptions about artistic practices and the role of an artist in a research process. The use of the normative term 'relevant' in the *Buren & Bagage* project brief hints at the presence of (tacit) assumptions. It is not defined what exactly is meant by 'relevant'. However, 'taking the question what relevant roles cultural actors might develop as a starting point' suggests the presence of assumptions about what might or might not be considered 'relevant'.

The research team consists of six people: four representatives of the theatre company Het Laagland, the project initiator, who is part of both ITEM and the Research Centre at Zuyd, and myself. Het Laagland's core practice is creating theatre performances. The project initiator is a researcher and teacher with a background in anthropology and Science and Technology Studies. I am a researcher and teacher at a liberal arts college. My background is in art and management of cultural organizations. The different backgrounds and institutional affiliations of the participants give the project an interdisciplinary nature.

Content-wise, the focus is on developing what the representatives of Het Laagland call an *ontmoeting*, an encounter or meeting between people (mostly two) who do not know each other. The Laagland *ontmoeting* goes beyond a casual encounter. The researchers investigate what is needed to create a safe and comfortable space to foster what they call a genuine and authentic interest in each other's life-stories. Similar to a theatre performance, an *ontmoeting* is an ephemeral experience. It only exists in the lived moment, between those involved (Het Laagland, 2018). The development of *ontmoetingen* is the Laagland's response to the content-aim the project-initiator had formulated.

The project initiator provided me access to this project by offering me a spot in the research team for the final quarter of the project. My task was to document the project and its outcome in writing. This task enabled to observe the research process and discuss my observations with the participants.

At the Hybrid Labs Symposium I presented a black box. As my focus is on assumptions about the artists' *practices* I was inspired by Bruno Latour's famous metaphor of the 'black box' (1987). Latour introduces this concept to clarify how in communication about scientific results, the social and practical work-processes *behind* scientific knowledge remain invisible (black boxed) and therewith mysterious and unquestioned. This is why Latour was interested in making visible what was black-boxed: the everyday practices, processes and social dynamics *behind* scientific knowledge. His work reveals what goes on inside the laboratory. Inspired by Latour's approach to studying scientific practices, my focus is on making visible the everyday practices and processes of artists in a research project. By focusing on *practices* within the day-to-day work environment, I try to lay bare how participants' assumptions might influence research practices.



On my 'black box' an image of a box of chocolate Easter eggs takes up a central spot. This object captured my attention during several meetings with the artists. Therefore, I decided to take it seriously as what Sherry Turkle calls a 'provocation to thought' (2007, p.5). Turkle (2007) explains how following an 'evocative object' enables reflection on the ideas and concepts the object evokes. I decided to follow the chocolate Easter eggs to see what I am able to understand about assumptions on artistic practices in my fieldwork in *Buren & Bagage*. It becomes clear how following the chocolate Easter Eggs raises awareness of a stubborn influence of what C.P. Snow characterized as a 'Two Cultures Discourse' (Snow, 1959) on assumptions about artistic practices and the role of the artist.

I will point out how a focus on identifying distinct values or 'relevance' – as it was indicated in the project brief – of artistic practices complicates rather than facilitates the research collaboration.

Following the chocolate Easter eggs

The box of chocolate Easter eggs takes me to a team meeting at the kitchen table of K, one of the theatre artists in the research team, on Monday evening March 5 2018 in Maastricht. I bring the box to the meeting, because the abundant availability of tea and candy had captured my attention during team meetings. On February 2nd I had for instance written in my notebook: 'Random thought about the first three meetings: informal atmosphere during meetings (tea, cookies, chocolate)'. Perhaps this is why I had noticed K's promise of making sure there would be enough tea and sweets at her place with some amusement. My gift was received enthusiastically. And so the meeting started with a casual conversation about chocolate. According to K my chocolates are 'the good ones', so we discussed what for us is good or bad chocolate. Such casual conversations about random topics such as the sweets and tea that were on the menu were a returning practice at almost all meetings. 'Candy is taken very seriously' I wrote on March 13th. This time M, the other theatre artist, brings a box of chocolate Easter eggs, which again evokes a discussion about chocolate. The discussions about the sweets, which appear very random, begin to stand out to me after a while. I notice that no meeting would start without at least a full teapot (or two) and a generous stock of sweets within reach. My note of February 2nd hints at an assumption about a link between the chit-chat about tea and sweets and what I perceived as an 'informal atmosphere' during meetings, which seems important to the artists. I decide to focus on this assumed link a bit more.

The seemingly irrelevant chitchat about chocolate, which expanded to conversations about whatever was going on in everyone's life, draws my attention to the many informal conversations we had during meetings. These conversations provide insight in the personal lives and characters of the project participants. K's fondness of sweets, for example, which she is apparently known for among family and friends, or M's love for her cat, or J's caretaking of his son. Through all the informal chatting I was getting to know details about the personal lives of my colleagues at a pace and intensity I was not used to. I also noticed that personal conversations easily got serious and even emotional. In addition to lighthearted chitchat about chocolate or cats also serious personal experiences, memories, ambitions and fears were shared that sometimes moved participants to tears.

For example, K and M had written a couple of what they call 'personal columns' and J had written a long personal letter to K and M. These writings were identified by the Laaglanders as part of their research. In these writings the Laaglanders reflected on their personal experiences and thoughts that the research process had evoked. The writings were shared by the artists, who read them aloud during team-meetings. On two occasions it happened that team members started to cry while a piece of writing was read aloud, because they were moved by the content. For me, this intimate approach in meetings took some getting used to; both because I sometimes wondered about the relevance of seemingly 'off-topic' conversations and because the level of intimacy of the conversations made me feel a bit uncomfortable. As if I were a stranger intruding a close-knit friend group that shares personal details about their lives.

When discussing this with the Laaglanders, they indicate that they value the openness and space to discuss what they call 'whatever wants to exist' very much, because this is when what they call the 'real ideas' for their work arise. The Laaglanders explain to me how they are used to working 'inside out'; which they explain as starting from thorough 'self-research': intuitively taking personal thoughts, experiences, memories and emotions as a vantage point for their work. 'Everything we do, is intuitive', says K. M adds: 'if it's really personal, you can relate to it as a listener. What really comes from inside you, is good. We learned at [theater] school to start from yourself, from your own 'inner fire''. This way, informal, personal conversations are perceived as input for the research.

If we look at the content of *Buren & Bagage*, it becomes clear that an intuitive interest in personal life-stories and in creating a situation in which what 'wants to exist' can be shared, is what drives the project. The approach to the *ontmoeting* demonstrates this. The Laaglanders explain their *ontmoeting* as a situation where they individually engage in a semi-structured conversation with a person they have not met before. The conversation starts with an open question from one of the researchers. Every researcher has their own personal question. For, the question should be something that 'truly matters' to them. K and M for example introduce me to the *ontmoeting* by K asking me her question during our first meeting. She asked: 'did you become the person you wanted to be?'. Thus, we spent the first hour of our first meeting in a conversation about this question. From the question it became clear that the Laaglanders were also interested in *my* life-story. Later, they explicitly confirm this. They indicate that it is important for them to understand 'what matters to me' in order to be able to relate to me. Establishing a personal connection is an important driver of their work. The third theatre artist, I, explains as follows: 'Perhaps this is the most important [in our work]. It is about establishing a true connection. And our artistic research develops towards finding the core [of our work]. It is about connecting and making contact.'

In this regard, the Laagland artists stress utilizing the term ‘conversation’ rather than ‘interview’ to characterize the nature of the *ontmoeting*. According to them, as opposed to an interview, the conversation does not aim for a certain goal or outcome. The aim is not to collect specific information. Instead, an *ontmoeting* aims at creating an open and inviting atmosphere where participants can discuss ‘whatever wants to exist’, from chocolate and cats to serious life issues. The nature of the content is considered ‘private’ and will never be shared or discussed outside the *ontmoeting*. What matters is the nature of the ephemeral experience for the people involved: evoking a sense of connection on a personal level.

According to the Laaglanders, an *ontmoeting* needs to take place in ‘the right atmosphere’, because this is needed to be able to establish a ‘true connection’. Figuring out what the ‘right atmosphere’ for an *ontmoeting* entails, is subject of the research. K explains this in one of her columns, which I included with her permission in my black box. K writes: ‘I go to the theater well in advance to prepare one of the dressing rooms. Enough coffee, tea, water and a fully charged phone [...] already determining the setting. The best spot for this man – let’s hope that we can have a good conversation in the right circumstances’.

The topic of atmosphere brings us back to the box of chocolate Easter eggs. Returning to the team meeting of Monday March 5th, it points attention to the atmosphere in which the meeting takes place, namely an evening at K’s kitchen table. The kitchen table had been chosen as a meeting place intentionally. Not only for this meeting, but for several others as well. In fact, my first meeting with the artists had been at the same kitchen table. K and M told me that they liked meeting at the kitchen table, because the coziness and informality of the space facilitate establishing a ‘true connection’. It stood out to me that when we were not meeting at K’s kitchen table, our meetings were in the Laagland’s ‘living room’. ‘Living room’ is how the theater group’s meeting space is called. The ‘living room’ is a big open space at the Laagland’s place of residence. An effort had been made to make this space look like a real living room. It has a big wooden dining table by the window, where the Laagland staff meets for lunch and big, cozy couches with a lot of colorful pillows, posters on the walls and filled bookshelves. For the *ontmoeting* itself an instrument that is used to create an informal, cozy and comfortable atmosphere is a giant brown chair. The chair – about a metre wide and twice as high – had featured as a prop in one of the Laagland’s performances in the past. A stepladder is needed to climb on it. It easily sits two to four people. It is made comfortable with colorful pillows and a tray of tea and sweets. Because of its vast size, the chair functions as a ‘cocoon’ in which an *ontmoeting* can take place. From outside the chair it is impossible to overhear the conversation that is taking place inside.

It becomes clear that following the chocolate Easter eggs evokes unpacking the notions of working from personal experiences and putting emphasis on the physical work-atmosphere. This way, the exercise enables finding some practical examples of what in the literature has been identified as virtues of the arts.

The focus on the elements of the physical work-atmosphere brings to mind for instance John Dewey’s argument that as an experience, art enables the acquisition of so-called ‘experiential knowledge’. That is: direct sensory knowledge about the world (see e.g. Dewey, 2005 [1934]). Elliot Eisner (1991) speaks of the attention in the arts to qualitative aspects of the environment; aspects that can be grasped through the senses rather than rationally. This can be recognized in the descriptions of how the Laaglanders seem to focus on environmental and sensory aspects of their work. For example: the attention paid to evoking

a sense of 'coziness' and informality through for instance the careful choice of location, of furniture and of making sure there is enough tea and sweets.

The second association from the chocolate Easter eggs, working from personal experience, calls to mind the argument that the arts address one's capacity for imagination and therewith for empathizing with others (Nussbaum, 1997; Greene, 1995). The snippets of personal life-stories of others provide what the Laaglanders call a 'mirror' for one's own life experiences. Gaining an insight in what matters in other people's lives, might make you critically reflect on the way you perceive issues in your own life. As Maxine Greene explains: "... the arts provide new perspectives on the lived world. [...] Informed encounters with works of art often lead to a startling defamiliarization of the ordinary." (Greene, 1995, p.4). This way, the arts may evoke empathy (see also Nussbaum 1997, 2010). By focusing on exchanging personal life-stories and on 'what matters' to themselves and to each other, it can be argued that the Laaglanders' practice is all about evoking empathy. Marta Nussbaum points at 'the ability to imagine what it is like to be in someone else's place' (Nussbaum, 1997, p.91). As an attempt to create an open and unconstrained conversation that only exists in the lived moment and in a cozy atmosphere, the *ontmoeting* seems to be all about creating a connection in which the participants might be able to imagine what it is like to be in each other's shoes.

It becomes clear that following associations from the box of chocolate Easter eggs hints at a conclusion that the *artistic practices* of the Dutch theatre company clearly confirm some identified 'values' of the arts.

Such a focus on pinpointing values of the arts, however, also evoked a sense of unease during my fieldwork. It isolated my position *as an academic* from that of the Laaglanders *as artists*. I noticed how a focus on identifying specific *artistic practices* and their (assumed) values tends to go hand in hand with pinpointing *differences* along the lines of what C.P. Snow many decades ago identified as a 'Two Cultures Discourse' (Snow, 1959). The emphasis in this discourse is on maintaining a distinction between the arts and the sciences as binary opposites. Within this discourse, the values of the arts are defined negatively, i.e. by what are *not* perceived as values of the sciences. Thus treating the two as inherently separate domains. When looking at the examples I provided when unpacking the notions of atmosphere and personal life-experiences in connection to the literature on values of the arts, the examples indeed seem to fit into a binary approach that pinpoints as values what is considered specific for arts (as opposed to sciences). Evoking imagination has for example been identified as a "dominant strategy" in the arts (Van Heusden, 2015, p.162).

Recent research on art-science collaborations questions thinking about virtues of the arts along the lines of Snow's 'Two-Cultures Discourse' (see for example Shapin, 2008; Andersson, 2009; Born & Barry, 2010; Vaage, 2015). Researcher Erik Andersson (2009) for example warns that what he calls 'reciprocal ignorance' between the fields might lead to stereotyped representations that are not representative of how art and science are performed today. Continuing to follow the chocolate Easter eggs brings me to the following instance from my fieldwork, which made me aware of this pitfall in practice.

On March 19th 2018 J, the fourth team-member from the Laagland reads a personal letter to K and M. In his letter J reflects on K's approach to the development of the *ontmoeting* in the following way: 'K to me

represents the Enlightenment in which Reason is of key importance. Reason assumes logic [...] And that's why discussion, philosophy and analysis are crucial. These are your *ontmoetingen*, K...'. J identifies K's *ontmoetingen* as rational, characterized by logic and analytical reasoning. This way, he provides a completely different perspective on K's *ontmoeting* than my examples of the same practice earlier, where I focus on K's attention to creating a cozy atmosphere in order to bring about an informal, personal connection. J provides a reading that according to the Two Cultures Discourse fits more to what is characterized as 'scientific' than as a virtue of the arts. The example shows that apparently, different lights can be shed on the same practice and looking for where the artist's approach confirms to existing ideas about values of the arts may lead to overlooking alternative interpretations.

Reflecting on this insight, a note from March 27th offers a fitting conclusion: 'perhaps my initial interpretation of the chocolate Easter eggs as evoking associations of a specific 'artistic' atmosphere was a bit too hasty. After all, as Easter is approaching, the chocolate sweets are obviously everywhere; inhabiting different 'cultures' with equal ease. Their equal presence at 'academic' meetings at the university proves their evident lack of uniqueness in the 'artistic' setting – the meetings at the Laagland. Similarly, looking for practices that confirm known values of the arts proves complex and confusing. It increases rather than decreases the distance between participants from different backgrounds. When I discussed this with the artists, they recognize the unease and complexity that can come from a narrow focus on virtues of the arts. They notice that such focus might bring a pressure of expectations that limits rather than encourages the collaboration. 'I sometimes struggle with this idea of needing to meet external expectations,' M explains. This conclusion reminds me of a fitting example Sarah Thornton (2014) provides when discussing a self-portrait by the artist Tammy Rae Carland: 'The scene [Carland's *I'm dying up here*(*Self-Portrait*, 2010)] evokes many of the ancillary expectations that befall artists,' she writes, 'the pressure to speak, to be seen, to perform, to convince, to entertain' (Thornton, 2014, p.72).

My black box and this essay provide an example of what the 'pressure' Thornton speaks about might look like in an artistic research collaboration. The examples from my fieldwork illustrate how such 'pressure' of assumptions and expectations about values of art practice might work in practice. Also, they show how the 'Two Cultures Discourse' – despite of its dismissal as 'outdated' (e.g. Vaage, 2015; Gere, 2010) – is difficult to weed out in practice. Explicating the stubborn influence of the 'two cultures' and how it might manifest itself in practice is an important first step in trying to manage and overcome its influence in collaboration. My future research continues to focus on how this influence can be managed and overcome in collaborative research practice. With this, my research builds on existing research on art-science collaborations that looks at how the influence of the 'two cultures discourse' can be overcome (see e.g. Wienroth & Goldschmidt, 2017; Rödder, 2016; Vaage, 2015; Farman et al., 2015; Born & Barry, 2010; Andersson, 2009;).

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