

open forum on shaping a thriving artistic ecosystem

16 December 2025, argos

This open forum explores some of the main concerns that (audiovisual) artists face today, such as visibility, distribution, self-organisation and self-production, support from the sector, residencies, new technologies such as VR and more. After mapping out the challenges and opportunities, we looked at the role of institutions in supporting artists. Some of the questions of this forum include: How can we provide spaces of rebellion against gatekeeping? How do institutions avoid gatekeeping? What is the responsibility of institutions towards the artists? How can institutions make space for artists without using them? How can institutions and artists collaboratively build trust?

Transcription of the conversation by Laura Tack

Guests: Sofia Dati (Wiels), Mariana Pecháčková and Hanne Van Dyck (Brussels Artist-Run Network), Serine ahefa Mekoun (independent multimedia author, writer, and producer), Tashattot collective, Lucas Dewulf (independent VR artist) and Nicolas Galeazzi (State of the Arts).

General intro

- introduction by Maryam K. Hedayat
- overview of the schedule of the day
- the shared topics discussed during the roundtables will return in the afternoon: we'll try to transform them into strategies within smaller groups
- the panel will focus on the topic of **trust**

Round of personal introductions

Sofia: curator Wiels in Forest, Brussels [where she had different] roles [in] exhibition making for contemporary arts, before: BSB, engagement with audiovisual arts and [she is]also part of the film programming collective Black Archive

Serine: filmmaker, [concentrates on] professionalisation of artists, antiracist policies, mechanisms to thrive and hack the white cube

Charbel: Tashattott is a collective of artists from the SWANA region that is scattered around the EU and Belgium

Rani: The collective was started 2 years ago in Ghent with funding from KIOSK gallery, with a curated expo as the first action. They moved to Brussels and started projects here.

Gaëlle: The collective worked the past two years with mostly Arab artists. They are from Lebanon. They have a residency at the moment. They organize screenings, talks and parties, and they give space or platforms to artists who have just arrived. We connect them with institutions and fellow artists.

Mariana: independent curator, part of Level 5 and Brussels Artists Run Network. [She is interested in how to] build community, share knowledge and resources, [and] engage in policy making.

Hanne: visual artist and part of a few collectives, works collaboratively (trust), Telegram group + newsletter to comment but also to share activities for ARN, building international connections, focus on artists' process

Lucas: not split between the art and the performer, curator and facilitating, to share knowledge or experience, open source framework, making or learning together in horizontal structures

Nicolas: based in performance arts, a lot in collectives, transformed into research, artist research, part of State of the Arts (SOTA) that made an Almanac. State of the Arts is a movement rather than an organisation, [consisting of] Brussels-based artists [who] gathered in 2013 engaging in cultural policy for the Brussels art scene, participating in demonstrations and organising conferences, cooperatives on EU level (e.g., on how to institutionalise yourself as artist / collective ?)

TRUST

What are the essential elements [needed] to establish trust between the artist and the institution?

Lucas worked mostly in groups with a horizontal structure and with the same level of power in the collaboration. Trust is already there. Recently, he has worked with bigger organisations and is not used to that. He realises the need to adapt and figure out other ways to hold each other accountable since the risks are bigger. On other occasions, he worked with friends working together on personal projects, but now [he is confronted with] bigger timeframes, [that might] require notes and contracts to add more clarity regarding the expectations on both ends [of the collaboration].

Maryam: Can you give us some specific anecdotes to illustrate your point?

Lucas: One organisation gave him (too) broad a framework to work with and with an agreed topic to work around, but Lucas has his own methods. More specifically, a conflict arose since he did not know how much he could ask from them, how he could deal with their budget, and where to stock his material. These brought frictions in communications, of boundaries and into the overall process. From the organisation's side, they concluded that maybe his artistic vision was too big for them to facilitate.

Maryam: So, the expectations might not have been communicated clearly and forms of support might not have been stipulated.

Gaëlle: Tashatott are neither artists, nor an institution, but they are creating bridges between both. As intermediaries, they are very transparent to facilitate the transfer of information and are very clear from the start. This is fundamental [to build] trust. Communication is prior to the collaboration!

Rani: A contract alone is not enough. One should be able to communicate, to understand the values of that institution and to understand one another and the methods. [This importance attributed to communication] is also not starting from a place of need but from a place of curiosity and the desire to get to know each other. The contract is based on that. [An example from their] experience [is that their] first exhibition and funding [only came about] after long talks.

Charbel: [The drafting of c]ontracts and these conversations are not easy for the artists. [Another] example [is the collective's experience with] argos & Maryam. Now Charbel feels part of the argos team.

Serine: Trust starts with believing in yourself.

Serine works at Podiumkunsten to empower artists of colour by giving them the necessary tools, sharing the things to be aware of before starting the job, and pointing out the rights that one has. Not knowing yourself makes the relationship or confrontation with the institution difficult and conflictual. Therefore, it is most important to trust oneself. This [self-confidence] takes a long time [to build and the] early stages [on the artist's journey], like art schools, should invest in [building] that.

Maryam: One has to be wary not to be naïve.

Serine: For [my]self, this was a reality check. To start, you should learn to understand your environment and be aware that you might not be able to actually work in certain places, to preserve yourself. Getting access to information and being grateful are other attention points. Spreekuur is an open session that Podiumkunsten organises every Friday to support artists who have questions about grants, budgets, administration, and all things practical. These are weekly consultation sessions, which are mostly about demystifying, and being guided, in order to break that wall that an institution seems to have built. Once you are able to do that you build strength. [One should] break the image of the poor artists without rights.

Maryam: So, trust in yourself and be aware that also institutions need artists. If you are aware of that, you [find the strength in you to] do more.

Serine: When you are equipped with leverage and arguments, knowing that you can say no, gives you a lot of power. There are a lot of toxic dynamics, but with this knowledge, you have an advantage. I refuse to keep the idea of the big bad wolf alive or give too much power to the wolf.

Sofia works in different contexts [occupying] both [the] role [of the artist and the institution]: how does she feel about trust?

Sofia: Relationships of trust are built through time. [It often starts with b]eing available to listen. It is not only related to material or practical considerations. The artists you invite also require a framework of care. She does not know how to feel about trusting an institution

because [transactional relationship] needs contractually binding documents and [the outline of] reciprocal responsibilities, while trust is [situated] on another level: between the curator and the artists with their own practices. Through an actual conversation and by listening, the transparency, and the clarity are [reached that are] necessary for a healthy collaboration. It is important to know the limits of this trust, which can work best or only be productive if we manage to build relationships on a personal level that are sustainable for the long term, rather than [a merely transactional relationship of] the institution versus the artists.

Maryam: It seems that the more you collaborate, the more you feel at home. However, many institutions chase the idea of novelty and want to change their programmes regularly, to bring new work. Their aim is not necessarily to support an artist throughout the years, which makes it hard to build these long-term collaborations.

Sofia: These are choices that have to be made within the institution. BSB was focused on creating spaces for long-term collaborations. Wiels would perhaps not work with the same artists each year, but this does not necessarily mean that the relationship is broken after that one expo. You continue to collaborate, to build networks, to connect people. This is also a question of methods, of how we work.

Maryam: I hear it is important to invest in care.

Sofia: The myth of giving space can also be broken since this is not only a one-way conversation [between an institution and artists]. [As an institution you] can build conversational methods. You are always meeting new artists, but you can work on how to enter the conversation, work on how to listen, and work on your expectations. As a curator or an institution, you might have expectations that might not be the same as the artists. There is no magical formula to solve miscommunication, but tools can always be found to improve [communication].

Hanne: Hanne works a lot with different people. There is no formula to work together well, but the tools she has found are: transparency (e.g., about finances, and missions) and a good feedback system, in order to open a space for the other person to speak up. This creates trust and comfort.

Maryam: Is this something you established prior to the collaboration?

Hanne: Not necessarily. You do not need to have feedback formalised every month, but just say that there is a space for feedback [can be enough]. It can be hard to speak up, so opening that window is essential (e.g., talking about finances can be hard). One needs to also be able to handle the uncomfortable emotions that might arise from these feedback sessions.

Nicolas: It is never guaranteed that trust can be established. It is a delicate connection to create. To make this gesture of making things more outspoken and formalised through a contract can really help to create that feeling, because it makes trust visible and establishes an act that shows trust, like a handshake.

Mariana: Being aware and curious is key. When you visit different places, it is good to always ask questions and be curious to gauge if there are shared needs and values. You should not come to the institutions with your own expectations alone, but you should see it from the start as a collaboration, which [as is the case with any collaboration] can be difficult.

Hanne: When we visit spaces, we often ask about how they pay rent, how the relationship to the neighbourhood is, how they organise themselves etc. so that an open conversation can already be opened and all cards are on the table.

Gaelle: When you do share feedback with institutions and you show that you are not pleased or you would like to change something, it is very easy for institutions to ignore this and go with another option. [As such they can] avoid reflecting [on the problem addressed by the feedback]. The collective had this situation of an institution contacting them, but then decided not to put on the event. They emailed pointing out this lack of trust and giving feedback, but the organisation never answered. It is very easy to let go of artists because organisations have many other options.

Maryam: This shows the vulnerability of the artists. When you want to be heard and are dismissed instead, a sensation of being used can arise.

Charbel and Rani: We were actually used to it. That sensation was felt strongly.

Serine: You cannot let this break your enthusiasm and lose your values. You can also take the example of decolonial thinking. Five years ago it was a big trend and now you feel institutions are getting tired of it. They are now moving more towards feminism or other areas. You can see this shift even beyond the institutions.

Nicolas: Institutions can be a great tool in society, but at the same time they have this power that they can use to disempower others and gain more power themselves. In the end, it is really about understanding what empowering means.

Serine: Trust also means embracing the possibility of failing, learning from mistakes to grow in the environment where you work instead of being punished for your mistakes. On the other hand, as an institution, you are not always backed by your director or the people above you so there are limitations that you can feel once you are inside the institution. An individual maneuver can be limited if you do not have support. To look at the issue fully, you always need to look higher up at who is in power and try to understand what are they fighting for. Sometimes you are bullied by your own boss. There is the example of cultural workers who are hired for diversity programmes, but once they are inside there is zero desire to change. You can struggle inside your organization, but how do you explain this to the outside? How do you own up to your institutions even though they are flawed?

Maryam: There is a lot of performativity involved.

Serine: Even if you are a director of an institution, you can be tied down. The entire structure needs to be rethought.

Sofia: This involves going back to the idea of the contract as a tool to ensure trust since trust is not a given. Find an agency to co-write a contract and put your own conditions in it that even can include things that go beyond merely practical issues, such as the values you defend, the conditions in which you prefer to work. You can always fall back on this contract.

Nicolas: The contract [as a finalised document] has this fall-back function, but the act of making a contract also raises awareness, which is also good. You prevent the fall-back function whilst you are making it. The process of drafting a contract is the process of putting on the table your convictions and conditions. It starts a discussion and raises questions that build up a relationship.

Lucas: As an artist it can be worthwhile to always look for a clear methodology with formalised feedback moments, to check in if everything is working on the different levels of the collaboration, such as the financial part, but also the well-being of the artist involved.

Hanne: Yes, it can also be good to formalise feedback. Also the idea is to have a contract that is not strictly speaking legal, but that is more of a guideline to follow during the execution of this legal contract.

Lucas: Social contracts that are trust-based are also interesting since they also raise the question of how to change the law, or the enforceability of a contract. What moves a legal contract is the idea that the fallback is juridical, basically, whereas in a social contract, the fallback lies more in the values met, in the personal confrontations.

Q&A session

Questions from Slido:

Question 1: I have the impression that organisations do not realise their staff is under salary, and they expect artists to do work they are not paid for.

Question 2: What happens when trust is broken? What tools to repair?

Lucas: There is this sensation that as an artist you also have to manage the team of the institutions.

Nicolas: In the Netherlands a group of artists created a code for fair practices and a lot of institutions are following it, including the Mondriaan Fonds. This is a structural conversation, not only in the institution or the artists themselves. The attest is an interesting space for that.

Hanne: We had a conversation yesterday about the institution as a daddy, as the overworked daddy that does not have the time to go to therapy, and then the artist is the overworked mother that provides unpaid labour.

Serine: Earlier I said that if you want to make it happen, you need to look up and you need to look down. Why do artists accept underpaid assignments? Because they are new and need

to learn? It is about setting boundaries. You are going to get what you ask for. If you want to get paid, go to places that will pay you. Stop saying yes to assignments that are not paid. In the beginning, you might have to accept underpaid jobs, but it is also your own responsibility [to look out for paid ones].

Maryam: It can be a collective statement of solidarity when all artists jointly decide to agree not to accept underpaid assignments.

Sofia: In parallel, this process should be done within the institutions. One time an institution asked someone for a talk without mentioning a fee, and when the invitee asked for it, there was no fee. They approached the director about this, and the director responded that it is the job of the artist to demand a fee, not the institution. There are exercises within the institutions for fair pay.

Nicolas: The artistic practice relies on a lot of long-term work that does not get paid, which is especially the case for freelancers. Without that long-term work, however, the institution would not have the art. The artist needs to get paid so that the practice can get paid.

Hanne: It goes further than a fair payment. People do not have time to work and organise. For [all the preparatory] work [it demands] to organise fair practice, for example, there is no payment or energy [invested by] institutions. It is often work that we [as artists] do.

Tashatott - Gaele: We were invited for a project about Palestine, even though we are not even Palestinian. They expected us to be in the meeting, and then they said that they would plan and apply for funds in the long term. At a certain moment, we declined to keep attending the meeting, because we cannot do months of work in advance. We had to make it clear that we aren't getting paid every day.

With Tashatott, we always pay the artist, no matter what we work on. We as programming or organising staff do not get paid. Sometimes a budget is allotted to us, but it is almost never enough. Now we make sure that we also get paid as well.

It is a lot of invisible work. In the beginning, we accepted a lot of underpaid work, but now after two years, we are trying to figure out how to communicate that we are three people who need to get paid as three because we actually do the work of three people.

Question 3: When an institution has abused an artist, should the artist go public and denounce it? What tools [are there] to protect yourself, but also [to] warn other artists?

Question 4: Are there any alternative whistleblower tools besides the press?

Hanne: Engagement arts?

Maryam: Engagement arts came on the map concerning the Jan Fabre company and [cases of] sexual transgressions in the arts. They have also reached out to WANDA, a collective which I am a part of, and which focuses on diversity issues in the arts.

What do you do when there is a case of abuse? You can be pretty vulnerable as an artist. What do you do?

Lucas: Just like institutions ask me sometimes if I can recommend someone, [in a similar way] we artists [can] give each other word-of-mouth information about which institutions are not okay.

Hanne: We can think about what the Brussels artist-run network could do. We need tools on how to describe something in an objective way [in case of conflict]. I know someone whose studio got violated. They shared this in a group and got support.

Nicolas: The tool of non-violent communication is very important in this case. The restorative practice in these cases is fundamental. Often there is a possibility for restoration. We need to consider these possibilities. Sometimes going to the press helps, but sometimes it really does not.

Tashatott - Charbel: Since the genocide in Gaza there has been a lot of unclear communication from the institutions, trying not to commit to anything.

Hanne: Would you in that case be interested in approaching institutions for a restorative conversation?

Tashatott - Charbel: We actually tried, but they [did not enter into a conversation]

Tashatott - Rani: Also we should not trust the press, so...

Serine: It is important to not be alone, to find allies. When you experience racism, it is often not recognized, not even by the law. This changes when societal standards change. A couple of years ago there was already a different response to racism. There is often a constant gaslighting.

One thing that worked well was when within the collective, we created lists with the people whom we think are dangerous. As such, we warn each other. There is no explicit, but more an underground way of communication.

Often the press picks up the fight that has been fought for years. For them it is easy.

Question: If you are working from an institution, how are you to deal with the fear of wronging the artist?

Maryam: It remains important to remember that institutions are people.

Serine: Good question. What is missing today is that the institutions' representatives are not here. We are preaching for the choir.

Fair pay is basic empathy. Make your budget properly. We still find a lot of incompetent people in financial administration. If you find something important then budget it.

Sofia: I do not know exactly what wronging means here, but if we manage to embed a collaboration or working relationship in mutual trust, it is also a matter of making sure that you provide tools or have tools available for when things go wrong.

Circling back to the previous topic of abuse, restorative practices are important, but it should be acknowledged that this is not always possible. There should be mutual availability for this process. Wronging can have big consequences. They should not be afraid to ask questions. Also not afraid to ask for external advice or tools.

Mariana: Institutions [consist of] people that have emotions and feelings. [Institutions should be] able to admit that they have made a mistake. I have the idea that it is more usual for artist-run structures to accept that one can make mistakes.

Hanne: When talking about humanising them, asking them for help [one should realise, however, that] the system is so patriarchal. It does not work that way. Why is there such a gap between artist-run initiatives and institutions? What are they waiting for?

Lucas: The need for community and self-expression is more complex and is harder to quantify than the needs for individual safety, such as having a home, food, etc. When I am organising [something], I am often thinking about the [material] needs of the people, such as the time, the work-hours, the food, etc.

Question from a person in the audience: Institutions should be aware of how the values that they communicate to the audience influence the work of artists inside of their institution. For example, when, as an institution, you are working with an artist who has a certain political stance that you do not communicate about, then you have the possibility to ignore those politics, or you can discuss openly that the institution cannot expressively endorse those politics, because of the board, for example.

Mariana: [There is the image of the i]nstitution as a caring figure that supports the specific artist and practice. Sometimes the people in the institution have other ideas than the institution at large. This discussion should [, therefore,] also take place within institutions. [This does not] just [concern] budget, but also care, which takes time [to discuss and implement].

Nicolas: The artists and the institutions are in it together.

Mariane: It is important to realise that the environment that we work in together is a very hostile political environment. When it comes to the question of why institutions do not show their fears and mistakes, it is because they have to show their strength within this climate.

Hanne: Then it [can precisely be a] choice [for them] to be more radical. Institutions can also think about how to change funding structures. This is not so different to artists who are deciding [jointly] that they do not want to do this anymore [in this way].

Sofia: We can step away from the figure that has to be strong, and develop tools for sharing. To me, a fear of wronging is also a fear of asking for advice.

Question from Slido: How to trust open calls from organisations when you have experienced that the selection process is not transparent?

Lucas: Open Calls are free labour. Perhaps artists should mass-produce applications. Maybe the process of applying should be industrialized as well.

Hanne: I have also experienced this process. I was invited to write an application directly, even though it was also an open call. It did not occur to me at the time that this was wrong.

Mariana: Again, this is an imitation of democracy?

Sofia: It goes back to sharing the information that you have. If you know then you can communicate: "Watch out. This organization works with direct invitations for their open calls."

Tashatott - Charbel: In job applications, it is the same.

Hanne: It should be possible to ask the institution what their application process is.

Mariana: Institutions should understand how much labour it costs to write an application. Organisations could work by giving feedback on proposals.

Mariana: I have experienced being invited to a project in which the fee changed halfway. Clear and transparent open call processes can serve to weed out the dodgy open calls.

Someone in the audience: Nowadays you sometimes even have to pay for an open call.

Someone else: Sometimes even these projects run on the payments that were received via the open call. That is their budget. I have never ever received feedback on an open call. I do not think this will ever happen, because no one [seems to have] time.

Someone else: We have worked in the past to fight [for the awareness] that we can pay ourselves from production money.

Now, with public funding, it can be a criterium to refuse you, if you dare to ask too much for yourself. What Nicolas was saying about the new artist status [means also that] we should be cautious about what we share with whom. Having people in the institutions and sharing our experiences with them is very important, especially when it will come to a point where they [i.e. these particular persons within the institutions] themselves will be at risk and take risks. It is about our common humanity.

Nicolas: There was an open call, phased following two steps. The first step [consisted in briefly elaborating] your artistic practice and [including] a short statement about how you relate to the subject. Then they selected only three [applicants] to make a proper proposal, who were [actually] being paid to develop a proper proposal. At a certain point, this got totally out of control, [however,] and did not work at all.

Jesse [from the audience]: I have been in the commissions of the Kunstendecreet for visual arts. What I was positively surprised with was how well-informed the administration was when it came to fair payment. At a certain point, there was a collective that was criticised by a member of the jury on the amount of fee, but the president [who belonged to the administration] clarified that historically the visual arts are behind on collective fees when compared to the performing arts, for example.

Juist is juist. If they have a mandate, this should have repercussions. When institutions do not comply, [one should endorse] the possibility to cut their budget.

Serine: In that case, the question is who would be the right person in power to whom to address this.

Jesse: What is missing in the landscape is perhaps someone who would have this responsibility.

Someone in the audience: I asked the question [on Slido] about abuse in institutions. I was approached by a curator through multiple channels. This curator works for an ASBL that is active in different spaces. He said he was the curator of a festival and that he could pay me 800 euros, which was actually too little. I would have to sign a contract. I started working. After a couple of months, he said that there could be a technician to help, plus 200 euros more, with [the signing of] another contract. The exhibition happened. I waited a couple of weeks. According to the curator, they are waiting for someone from the ministry to pay them. There are more excuses and also the elections take place. I as an artist finally got the 200 euros, but I still miss the 800 euros that were promised at the start. The curator does not manifest himself at all in the communication with the ministry. Also, now, apparently, this contract turned the promised 800 euros into 200 euros. [After I discovered this] I was ghosted by the curator. I contacted the festival dealing with the finances to receive my pay. I have been traumatised by this experience, to have to beg for 800 euros, which had already been hugely underpaid to start with.

Someone in the audience: I have experienced this many times. Sometimes I did not get paid [at all]. I would have to take it to court, and nobody wants that. [This happened e]ven in art academies. Again the only thing that works against this, is to stick together, not just on social media, but in actual places. [It works to f]ind allies.