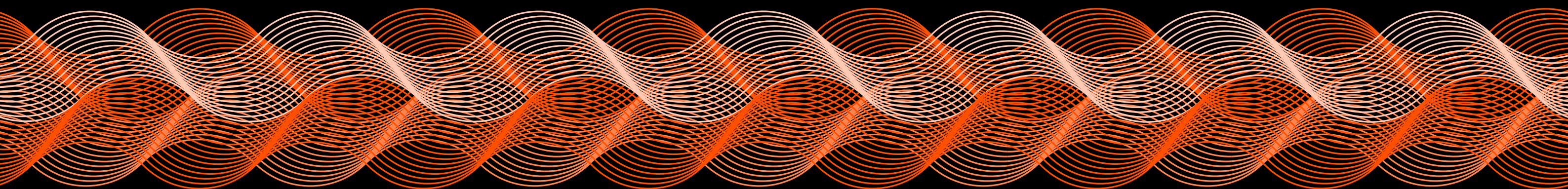


Chasing Your Own Tail:

The Inclusive Artist's
Process in Project-Based
Contemporary Dance



ANNELIES VAN ASSCHE

Résumé

En 1996, Maurizio Lazzarato a défini le concept du travail immatériel comme le type de travail qui produit le contenu informationnel et culturel de la marchandise. Le cycle de production de ce type de travail n'est pas défini par les murs de l'usine, mais se produit dans la société. Dans le même ordre d'idées, je soutiens que le processus de production de l'artiste ne se déroule pas seulement entre les murs de l'atelier, mais qu'il doit être considéré comme une notion plus inclusive dans la société. L'artiste de la danse contemporaine en Europe effectue un travail immatériel sur une base flexible dans le contexte de projets temporaires, une situation qui exige également un travail en réseau permanent afin de déterminer les opportunités de travail futures. Pour cet article, j'ai l'intention d'élargir la notion de processus de l'artiste et de l'aborder dans une perspective plus inclusive. Pour bien comprendre les processus créatifs d'aujourd'hui et comment ils sont profondément imbriqués dans notre économie néolibérale, je me concentrerai sur le lien entre le micro-monde du processus créatif de la danse contemporaine européenne, le mésomonde des institutions de danse financées et le macro-monde au niveau social, économique et politique plus large.

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Summary

In 1996, Maurizio Lazzarato defined the concept of immaterial labour as the kind of labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity. The production cycle of this kind of labour is not defined by the factory walls, but happens in society.¹ Building on this idea, I argue that the artist's production process does not happen between the studio walls alone, but should be considered as a more inclusive notion happening in society. The contemporary dance artist in Europe performs immaterial labour on a flexible basis within the context of temporary projects, a situation that also demands persistent networking in order to ascertain future work opportunities. For this article, it is my intention to broaden the notion of the artist's process and approach it from a more inclusive perspective. To fully understand creative processes today and how they are deeply interwoven with our neoliberal economy, I will concentrate on the connection between the microworld of the creative process in European contemporary dance, the mesoworld of the funded dance institutions, and the macroworld on the larger social, economic, and political level.

1. Maurizio Lazzarato. 'Immaterial Labour', in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (1996), pp. 133-47 (p. 136).

KEYWORDS

Contemporary dance, artistic work, creative process, precarity, flexibility, mobility, networking

MOTS-CLÉS

Danse contemporaine, précarité, mobilité, processus créatif, travail artistique, réseautage



Introduction

In 2002, dance scholar Mark Franko was likely one of the first to address the convergence between dance and work with the release of his book *The Work of Dance*, which offered new tools for dance scholars to study the relation of politics to aesthetics in the US in particular.² Following on from Franko's work, I proceed to explore what is particular about contemporary dance artists, and their relation to work, in Europe today, and how this ties in with more general issues of the project-based labour market and neoliberal society at large. In line with the description of 'the new spirit of capitalism' described by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, the contemporary dance artist in Europe performs immaterial labour on a flexible basis within the context of temporary projects, a situation that also demands persistent networking in order to ascertain future work opportunities.³ In 1996, Maurizio Lazzarato defined the concept of immaterial labour as the kind of labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity. The production cycle of this

². Mark Franko, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* (Wesleyan University Press, 2002), p. 2.

³. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, 'The New Spirit of Capitalism', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 18, 3-4 (2005), 161-88.

kind of labour is not defined by the factory walls, but happens in society.⁴ Following on from this, I argue that the artist's production process does not happen between the studio walls alone, but should rather be considered as a more inclusive process that happens in society. For this article, it is my intention to thus broaden the notion of the artist's process and approach it from a more inclusive perspective. To fully understand creative processes today, and how they are deeply interwoven with our neoliberal economy, I will concentrate on the connection between the microworld of the creative process in European contemporary dance, the mesoworld of the funded dance institutions, and the macroworld on a larger social, economic and political scale.

To build my argument, I will draw on a combination of sociological and performance/dance studies methods, an original inter- or even trans-disciplinary methodology I have developed. I will base my argument on data obtained from quantitative and qualitative research in the dance scenes of Brussels (2015–2016) and Berlin (2016–2017), such as survey reports, longitudinal in-depth interviews with fourteen informants, observations in the studio, and performance analyses.⁵ From a dance studies perspective, to fully grasp the production process in contemporary dance through the lens of its practitioners, it is also

necessary to explore the artistic output in which artists publicly address their working conditions — the most straightforward example of how current production modes affect artistic creation. Therefore, I will draw on the work of Serbian-born contemporary dance artist Igor Koruga. With the help of Koruga's work, I will uncover the artist's production process in an inclusive sense, portrayed as a chase with a threefold dimension. Firstly, project-based artists are continually chasing money in order to pursue their art making, in the first place, and to earn a living, in the second. Additionally, artists are chasing performing arts programmers who facilitate the chase after money: it rests with them to offer studio space, to provide co-production budgets, and to present creations. Lastly, project work goes hand in hand with paperwork, and a great deal of time is spent chasing papers related to the social, economic and political framework of administration, finances, legality, or unemployment benefits. During the production process, the threefold chase I have discussed unfolds both inside and outside the studio and before, during and after the creative work. In addition, several projects, and thus production processes, might be overlapping, which can complicate matters substantially. This acceleratory work regime, represented here as a chase, is also marked by flexibility and mobility. In what follows, I will dismantle these fast, flexible and mobile *modi operandi* in the production processes of contemporary dance artists in Europe. I will come to conclude that the general lack of time for creative work in this regime, usually regulated in limited time blocks dispersed over various locations, threatens to weaken the quality of the dance pieces we view on our stages.

4. Lazzarato, p.136.

5. The dance practitioners I have observed in Brussels and Berlin have in common that they operate in the project-based labour and art market as autonomous workers, thereby relying on public funding to a greater or lesser extent. In other words, they create their own work opportunities, regularly swapping the position of choreographer and performer (sometimes exercising both simultaneously). Their dance practices are not characterized by a specific movement style, but they all presuppose a basic feature: the expansion of the definition of *dancing*, wherein all bodily activity can be classified as dance and can become an element of choreography. While my informants remain anonymous, an overview of my selection procedure and criteria can be found in: Annelies Van Assche, *Dancing Precarity: A Transdisciplinary Study of the Working and Living Conditions in the Contemporary Dance Scenes of Brussels and Berlin* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Ghent University, 2018) pp. 69–79.

Social acceleration

Sociologist Hartmut Rosa posits that modernisation is not only a multileveled process in time, but also signifies a structural (and highly culturally significant) transformation of time structures and horizons, which he captures with the concept of ‘social acceleration’.⁶ According to Rosa, social acceleration comprises three spheres, including technological acceleration, acceleration of social change, and acceleration of pace of life. Behind these dimensions there are external key-accelerators, which Rosa terms the economic motor (capitalism), the cultural motor (cultural ideals of modernity, such as the fulfilled life), and the structural motor (functional differentiation). Whereas the phenomena related to technological acceleration can be described as acceleration processes within society, he stresses that the phenomena of acceleration of social change could be classified as the acceleration of society itself.⁷ For example, before classical modernity, a son inherited his father’s occupation, while in classical modernity, occupational structures tended to change within generations as sons and daughters were free to choose their own professions, which usually lasted a lifetime. In late modernity, however, occupations no longer extend over the whole work-life, which means that jobs today change at a higher rate than generations.⁸ Par-

adoxically, technological acceleration — which logically ought to decrease the time needed to carry out everyday processes of (re)production, communication and transport — seems to have caused an increase in the scarcity of time instead of slowing down the pace of life. Many people ‘feel hurried and under time pressure’.⁹ Indeed, we appear to do more in less time: instead of enjoying the increase in free time enabled by

technological acceleration, we rather reduce breaks and do more things simultaneously. Rosa gives the very familiar example of people cooking while watching TV and making a phone call at the same time — in a word, multitasking. An acceleration society, as Rosa puts it, therefore only applies to a society ‘if, and only if, technological acceleration and the growing scarcity of time (i.e. an acceleration of the “pace of life”) occur simultaneously’.¹⁰

Contemporary dance artists manoeuvre in this acceleratory society between projects and operate in a post-Fordist and neoliberal economy of work. Post-Fordism — which describes a work regime grounded in flexible work formats and immaterial labour — should be distinguished from neoliberalism, which resurged in the 1970s (alongside post-Fordism) and has since become the dominant guiding principle for economic thought and management, at least in Western society. Neoliberalism is also an ideology: it has become a hegemonic mode of discourse in political-economic thinking that favours withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision. Its impact on labour is complex, but the neoliberal mode of governance is grounded in maximising market liberty and entrepreneurial freedom through deregulation and privatisation, thus restructuring society according to the principle of the dynamic process of competition. In her text, ‘Notes on the Politicality of Contemporary Dance’, Ana Vujanović writes that, ‘speaking from a macro-perspective, the contemporary international dance scene mostly works according to the principles of the tertiary sector of neo-liberal capitalism, and therefore functions as a training ground of post-industrial economy’.¹¹ She emphasises that contemporary dance artists celebrate these post-Fordist and neoliberal modes of production, such as ‘nomadism, flexibility, multi-tasking personalities, collaboration, and endless networking’. However, Vujanović un-

6. Hartmut Rosa, ‘Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society’, *Constellations*, 10, 1 (2003), 3–33 (p. 4).

7. *Ibid*, p. 7.

8. *Ibid*, p. 8.

9. *Ibid*, p. 9.

10. *Ibid*, p. 10.

11. Ana Vujanović, ‘Notes on the Politicality of Contemporary Dance’, in *Dance, Politics & Co-Immunity*, ed. by Gerald Siegmund and Stefan Holscher (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2013), pp. 181–91 (p. 191).

derlines that this celebration is paradoxical, because ‘these modes are responsible for turning artists’ lives into an increasingly precarious existence’.¹² Most importantly, she adds that the celebration of these production modes makes dance artists politically opportunistic, because they in fact become complicit with neoliberal ideology. Yet, the question remains as to whether these modes of work are truly celebrated by contemporary dance artists: the aspect of endless networking does not exactly sound like something that is applauded by dance artists per se, especially since *endless* carries the rather negative connotation of being seemingly without end, tiresomely long, or ceaseless.

A look into the oeuvre of Serbian-born performing artist Igor Koruga reveals that the relationship to these modes of working is more complex than a simple celebration. His creative practice revolves around the working conditions of neoliberal society in general — and in the arts in particular — and the implications these have for human lives. I begin by introducing his work, which will help to elucidate the multifaceted state of affairs. Thereafter, I aim to establish an inclusive understanding of the artistic production process by dismantling the notion on the micro-, meso- and macro-level. In doing so, I make it clear that an artistic production process entails much more than studio work alone.

¹². *Ibidem*.

Temporaries: Temporary dance artists

After graduating from a master’s in anthropology and ethnology at the University of Belgrade (Serbia), Igor Koruga studied for a master’s in Solo/Dance/Authorship (SODA) at the Universität der Künste (UdK) and Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz (HZT) in Berlin. Even while Koruga remained in Berlin after finishing his dance education, his relationship with the city was like that of many international dance artists: he was continuously coming and going, in particular commuting between Berlin and Belgrade. Since 2006, he has collaborated with Station – Service for Contemporary Dance in Belgrade. Koruga’s work explores the social status of artists in the field of contemporary dance, and the conditions of temporality as the basis for both work and life. Koruga’s earlier work demonstrates that his research focuses primarily on the working and living conditions of neoliberal citizens, especially artists. For example, the collaborative project *Temporaries* (2012) — a neologism for temporary employees — questions the conditions for the production of art and knowledge by discussing notions such as temporality, flexibility and self-realisation with the audience. This performance event was created in collaboration with five other Belgrade-based dance artists — namely Ana Dubljević, Dušan Bročić, Jovana Rakić Kiselčić, Marko Milić, and Ljiljana Tasić—and was staged as a picnic during which the audience members are invited to play a game of charades.¹³ The audience is divided into two groups, each of which are split up into smaller groups, allocated over picnic blankets. The two main groups must play the game according to a different set of rules. The spectators were asked to guess terms related to the prevailing working

¹³. The observations here are based on a performance in Weld, Stockholm, in December 2013.



Igor Koruga, *Streamlined* (2014).
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conditions in the performing arts and these were then translated into short performance actions. Whenever an individual of the first group had guessed the correct term, that person was rewarded with free food and drinks from the buffet table, provided that they consumed these goods alone and refrained from sharing them with their group members. Other members were allowed to purchase food and drinks. Once the first group had guessed the right term, the second group received an overview of descriptions of short performance actions. This list of materials represented the content of the artistic-cultural programme of the evening event. The second group had to decide unanimously which performance action best fitted the previously guessed term. If they came to common ground, the action would be performed. Unlike the first group, the second group was provided with consumable goods spread over their picnic blankets. Whereas one blanket would have glasses, another blanket would have bottles of wine, encouraging the group members to share in order to experience a full picnic. As such, the spectators were stimulated to take responsibility for the evening's dynamics. Most relevantly for this article, the set-up, as well as the notions and related performance actions, display references to the neoliberal art market. In one of the acts (linked to the phrase 'united we stand'), the performers execute unstable movements as though they are falling continually and trying to keep each other up. This movement material is performed against the background of the sounds of the Road Runner being chased by Wile E. Coyote, and appears to stand for a feeling that corresponds to the notion of 'slow death' introduced by Lauren Berlant: a feeling that coincides with precarisation and the resulting diminution of future prospects. The notion of slow death can refer to the (typically physical) wearing out of a population in a way

that is comparable to the common phenomenon of burnout in an individual.¹⁴

In the development of the concept of 'slow death', Berlant adopts David Harvey's observation that

14. Lauren Berlant, 'Slow Death: Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency', *Critical Inquiry*, 33, 4 (2007) 754-80 (p. 754).

'under capitalism sickness is defined as the inability to work' as a point of departure and proposes to consider the domain of ordinary living: slow death is a condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life.¹⁵ In addition, it is a *chronic* condition that can most likely never be cured, only managed, especially in commoditised places. As Berlant describes, people seem to be wearing themselves out by excessive consumption as a coping mechanism for enduring precarisation. In her chapter on slow death, she develops this theory by exploring the obesity case in the US as an illustration. Nonetheless, besides the consumption of cheap, processed food, other examples include smoking, drinking, or shopping. In a similar vein, I propose, burnout seems to be indicative of today's slow death: due to social acceleration, we are increasingly consuming time we do not have. The physical wearing out of today's population is marked by a burning out of energy, which occurs in the first instance on a mental level but materialises when damaging the body. Very much like the coyote, neoliberal subjects in an acceleration society experience a sensation of not really getting anywhere, because they have myriad things to do at the same time. In Koruga's work, the reference to Wile E. Coyote's chase thus may stand for the ever-unsuccessful attempt to achieve something. In an interview with anthropologist Dunja Njaradi, Koruga explained this exhaustive nature of his life as a freelancer, referring to dance theorist Bojana Cvejić who had illustrated the situation using the example of this cartoon character. He tells Njaradi, 'it makes me wonder what exactly am I chasing after? What am I fighting for?'¹⁶ In response to this unsuccessful chase, the executed movement material in *Temporaries* also demonstrates how the performers are trying to keep each other from falling, which is in turn a beautiful portrayal of collective care and solidarity.

After playing the game of charades, the performance of *Temporaries* shifts to a discussion with

15. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 95.

16. Dunja Njaradi, *Backstage Economies: Labour and Masculinities in Contemporary European Dance* (Chester: University of Chester, 2014), p. 186.

the audience, when Koruga announces the following: ‘Actually, what I really want to talk about are the working conditions of our jobs and the ways they shape our lives, and also the possible ways of reshaping those conditions.’ Interestingly, Koruga speaks in the performance about ‘our’ jobs and ‘our’ lives, as though he takes for granted that the audience members could relate to these issues. Koruga draws on examples from his own life, explaining that his work basically consists of being at home, sitting in front of his computer, specifying that the concept of home already confuses him since this usually refers to a friend’s sofa or a temporary sublet. At his computer, he continues, he is mostly reading and writing applications for funding. While he does this, he also tries to hang out in social networks, at art festivals, in venues, and with producers. Furthermore, he explains that he travels a lot, which is the principal reason for always being single or in a long-distance relationship, and why it scares him to think about having children. In conclusion, Koruga states that ‘it comes down to this everlasting accelerating loop of chasing a promising future that might never come’, which again is reminiscent of Wile E. Coyote charging after the Road Runner while everyone knows he will never catch it. By summing up these examples, Koruga allows me to highlight several key issues that are part of an artist’s production process: he begins by pointing out the constant mobility and consequential feeling of homelessness. He then addresses the constant chase after funding and the additional chase after programmers (endless networking) and papers (writing applications). Lastly, he refers to the influences each of these have on his private life and future prospects.

Interestingly, all these issues reappear two years later in Koruga’s solo work *Streamlined* (2014), indicating that not much has changed in that time. In this solo work, Koruga runs on a treadmill for sixty minutes while speaking in public and literally selling himself. Thereafter, the metaphorical accelerating loop mentioned in *Temporaries* materialises in the form of the continuously accelerating treadmill on which

Koruga is performing his solo in *Streamlined*: instead of having future prospects, artists live in a perpetual present, or what Pascal Gielen has termed ‘bottomless instantaneity’.¹⁷ Yet, as Koruga explains in the performance, as long as he is running on the treadmill, his working conditions are in fact in good shape since he is performing and thus earning a living. The loop also represents the awareness that, paradoxically, when trying to practice politics through art, Koruga becomes an accomplice of the socio-economic and political system he attempts to criticise or protest against. Indeed, Koruga’s words exemplify Vujanović’s earlier statement that dance artists have become complicit with neoliberal ideology.¹⁸ What looks like a form of emancipation or resistance at first sight is in fact opportunistic: Koruga realises he is practicing exactly that which he is preaching against, and profiting from the system he criticises. In a similar vein, Ramsay Burt observes in his book on *Ungoverning Dance* that certain performances ungovern — meaning that they reveal the hidden relations of power that produce precarious lives through dance, on the one hand, or that they perform an alternative society, on the other — and that these are political acts.¹⁹ What Koruga exposes here is that it is often problematic to truly ungovern because, in doing so, one is in fact submissive to neoliberalism’s ideals.

¹⁷ Pascal Gielen, ‘A Chronotopy of Post-Fordist Labor’, in *The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism: Part Two*, ed. by Warren Neidich (Berlin: Archive Books, 2014), pp. 195–220 (p. 196).

¹⁸ Vujanović, p. 191.

¹⁹ Ramsay Burt, *Ungoverning Dance: Contemporary European Theatre Dance and the Commons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 233.

Wile E. Coyote vs the Roadrunner

As a superficial glimpse into Koruga's work reveals, the process of artistic production is marked by working modes that can be described as fast, flexible and mobile. The discourse on neoliberal subjectivity embedded in his oeuvre provides a fruitful avenue to discuss the production process of contemporary dance in Europe in an inclusive way. In an acceleratory work regime artists are confronted, in particular, with chasing their own tails. This idiom suggests that contemporary dance artists individually undertake exhaustive and often futile actions in order to create an artistic work, usually without making much progress. They are hustling and making their way as they travel from one place to another to chase after project funding and residencies. In this *fast* working mode, dance artists must manage a threefold chase after money, programmers and papers. In this chase, the *mobility* of contemporary dance artists in time and space becomes significant, especially considering the mechanism of the residency system on which most project-based contemporary dance artists have come to rely. It goes without saying that in such an acceleratory and mobile work environment, contemporary dance artists are required to show *flexibility* in various ways.

The art world operates, for a large part, in the gift sphere. In dance hubs such as Brussels or Berlin, artists are dependent on public funding that finances their projects. Funding can be direct, for example through project subsidies that enable artists to have a working budget for a creation, or indirect, for example through residencies that offer infrastructure for rehearsals and sometimes also technical support, lodging, meals, etc. Public subsidies for the performing arts mainly support

the artist in the creation of artistic products, typically live performances. Subsidies can be structural or conditional: in both cities mentioned above, workspaces, production houses, dance companies, venues and other institutions can apply for two- to four-year structural funding. However, since structural subsidy growth came to a halt in 2006 in Belgium, most independent artists have come to rely on project-based subsidies.²⁰ In the independent arts scene in Germany, subsidies have always been commonly project-based, because structural support goes to state- and city-regulated theatres, dance companies, and institutions. As Flemish art critic Pieter T'Jonck points out, conditional funding (in the form of project-based subsidies) engenders a precarious position that is not necessarily unattractive for artists, because it allows them to experiment and collaborate. However, even with the extra support provided by workspaces, production houses or alternative management bureaus, the situation remains precarious: the future of these institutions is only guaranteed in the short term, as they also rely on structural funding.²¹ Project-based funding in the arts therefore engenders a precarious position where the artist is dependent on financial support that is temporary and conditional. Project-based work in the arts is thus always accompanied by precarity, since artists invest time and work effort — and often also their own money — applying for project funding without the guarantee they will receive it.

In order to receive financial support, artists must write funding applications in which they describe the concept behind their new project, their intentions, their working schedule and required budget. Already from the outset, when seeking funding, the question arises as to whether others will be at all interested in the proposal. The sense of uncertainty when applying for funding is three-dimensional: you do not know *if* you will receive a subsidy, *how much* money you will

²⁰. Pieter T'Jonck, 'Dance in Flanders 2007-2013: An Outline of the Dance Landscape', in *Perspective: Dance*, ed. by Vlaams Theaterinstituut (VTi), (Brussels, 2013), pp. 11-30 (p. 21).

²¹. *Ibid*, p. 22.

be granted, and exactly *when* the sum will arrive. If you are dependent on the subsidy system as part of a production process, you must put a great amount of (unremunerated) work effort into acquiring subsidies by looking for partners, residencies, co-productions, programmers etc. Conversely, to avoid the funding system, an artist needs to be creative in finding money during the production process, which may equally take a great amount of (unremunerated) work effort. Or, as Hans Abbing puts it, one can certainly speak of an exceptional economy of the arts, in which an arts professional has to look for money to be able to work, whereas the common person works in order to earn money.²²

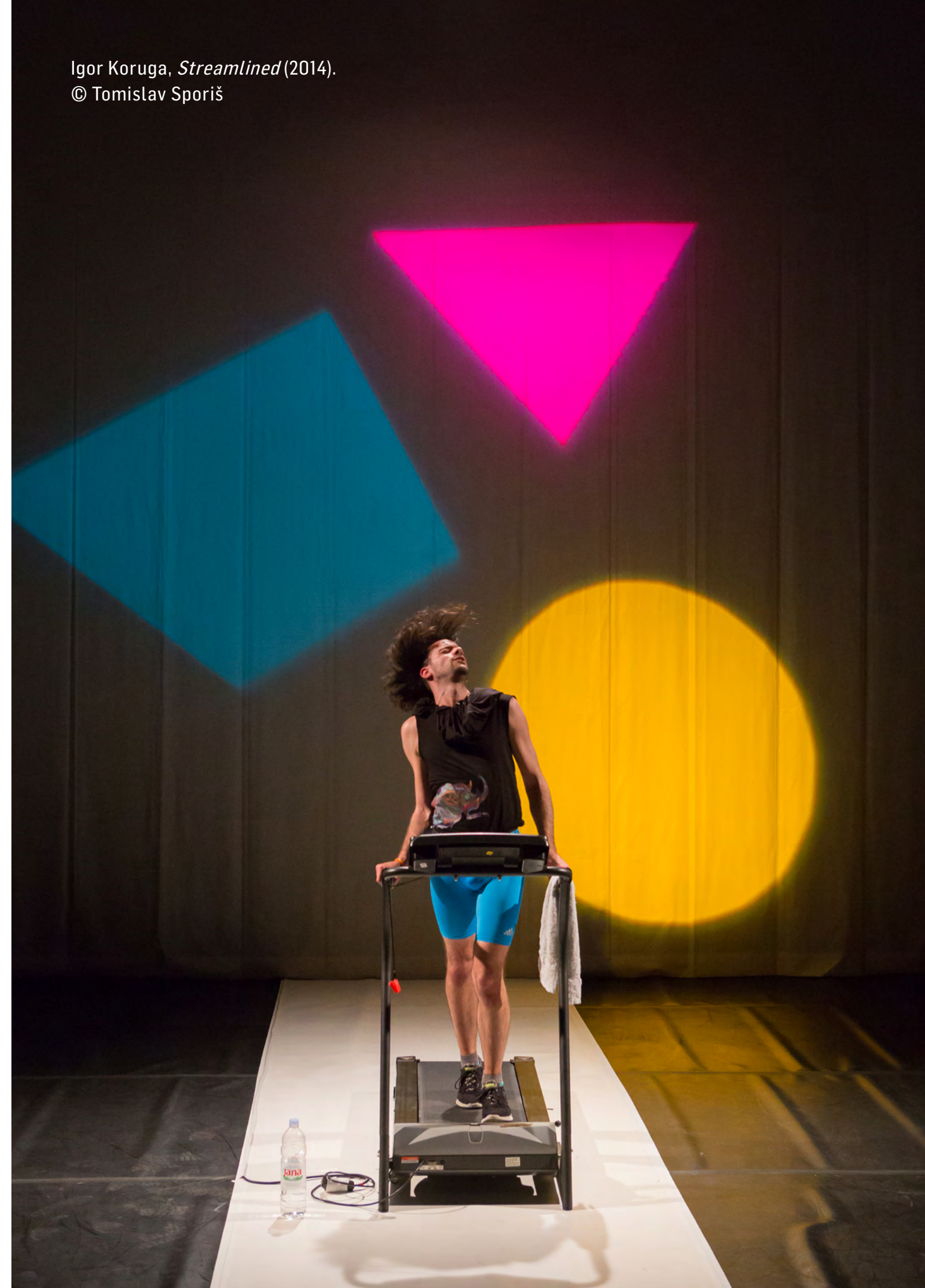
Furthermore, contemporary dance artists in Europe often rely on the most important form of *indirect* funding, which is known as ‘the residency system’. In order to be able to work efficiently, even in the research phase, having a studio space is essential. The studio is a place to focus on the project, where one can avoid the personal-professional confusion of the ‘home office’. In his exposé on the residency-based artist titled ‘Travelling, Fleeing, Passing’, Berlin-based choreographer Martin Nachbar outlines the basics of the residency system:

Producers from around the world offer living and work spaces, and sometimes financial backing too, for choreographers to be able to work there. The latter travel from one place to the next, follow their work, and thus become travellers who not only distance themselves from the world in order to create, but turn travelling into a condition, in order to keep their heads above water financially.²³

²². See Hans Abbing, *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008).

²³. Martin Nachbar, ‘Travelling, Fleeing, Passing’, in *B-Chronicles* (Brussels: Sarma, 2006), para 3.

Igor Koruga, *Streamlined* (2014).
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While the residency system is a generous form of indirect funding offering free infrastructure (and in the best case also accommodation, meals and a working budget) several of the dance artists in my research have addressed myriad flaws in the system that affect their production process — both flaws which can be generalised, and several specific flaws linked to particular residency programmes or spaces. Specific residency programmes appear to have certain expectations that impede the promise of uninterrupted work as well as the general research-oriented character of a residency, for instance when they include obligations to show a work-in-progress, or give only limited access to the studio space because dance classes are hosted in the same space in the evenings. More general flaws in the residency system include the scattering of creation periods in the studio over time and space. This type of career management requires an insurmountable amount of organisation and planning that leaves little time for research and experiment. A lack of spontaneity, shaped by the temporality of the residency system, is a further example of a major drawback. Most significantly, this general lack of time for creative work, now regulated in limited time blocks, may undermine the quality of dance pieces on European stages as the production process becomes fragmented. Hence, a variety of dance productions dependent on this regime are thus created in bits and pieces, sometimes remaining only part finished. On the mesolevel, such an acknowledgement of how artists work is thus not always reflected in institutional behaviour towards artists and their working modes.

Igor Koruga, *Streamlined* (2014).
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Chasing your own tail: Endless networking

We all recognise that the performing arts sector knows its own modalities of work. It is therefore necessary to once again highlight the specificity of the sector, in which most workers are busy creating performances or participating in projects. ‘Finding work’, in this sense, often has less to do with searching and applying for jobs, and more to do with looking for funding and residencies, on the one hand, and entertaining a broad professional network and the corresponding possibilities for project-based collaboration, on the other. The chase after direct and indirect funding I have outlined (in other words the search for work opportunities) is thus combined with maintaining a network of professional contacts. In general, a career in contemporary dance therefore develops largely between organisations, and requires networking skills, self-promotion abilities, and communication tactics to sustain it. As sociologist Delphine Hesters also observes, contemporary dance careers thus seem to develop largely between, and not within, institutions.²⁴ Looking at the mesolevel, contemporary dance artists thus manoeuvre from institution to institution, and in doing so utilise and develop their social capital for exploiting work opportunities.

²⁴. Delphine Hesters, *De choreografie van de danscarrière: Kwalitatief onderzoek naar de carrières van hedendaagse dansers in Vlaams-Brusselse context* (unpublished master thesis, KULeuven, 2004), p. 84.

²⁵. Vujanović, p. 191.

It is therefore crucial to devote at least some attention to the persistent chase after programmers which requires what Vujanović has termed ‘endless networking’.²⁵ In order to understand this chase, these network-oriented work activities can be best understood in the context of Bourdieu’s discourse on the different forms of capital.

In his influential article, originally published in 1983, Pierre Bourdieu distinguishes between three forms of capital, which are economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Whereas economic capital refers to capital that can be converted directly into money (in this case, an artist’s monetary income), cultural capital is only convertible into economic capital under certain conditions. According to Bourdieu, one’s cultural capital exists in an embodied state (e.g. acquired or inherited knowledge), an objectified state (e.g. possession of cultural goods) and an institutionalised state (e.g. educational qualifications or credentials). Lastly, social capital is made up of social connections and may therefore be conditionally transformable into economic capital. Bourdieu defines social capital as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’.²⁶ Contemporary dance artists utilise and develop their social capital to exploit work opportunities and thus indirectly for upward social mobility. Interestingly, Bourdieu notes that social capital always functions as symbolic capital, meaning the represented capital that is ‘apprehended symbolically, in a relationship of knowledge or, more precisely, of misrecognition and recognition’.²⁷ Following Bourdieu, aforementioned authors such as Abbing and Hesters agree that the symbolic capital of (performing) artists refers to public recognition or their ‘good reputation’ as professional, and therefore genuine, (performing) artists. As sociologist Rudi Laermans points out, an artist receives public recognition ‘from already consecrated peers or others — read: from important critics, established curators, “serious” collectors, and the like — who have the legitimate power to ascribe value’.²⁸ For contemporary dance artists social and symbolic capital are two internal forms of

²⁶. Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. by John Grissen Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241-58 (p. 247).

²⁷. *Ibid*, p. 255.

²⁸. Rudi Laermans, *Moving Together: Making and Theorizing Contemporary Dance* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015), p. 251.

capital, which means they are accumulated along the trajectory of professional dance artistry and reinvested within that career path. This implies that this accumulated capital is especially valuable within the field of the performing arts, to a greater extent than it is outside of the field. At the same time, social and symbolic capital — taken together with accumulated professional capital — form the three success factors for increasing work opportunities which may lead a boundaryless career to become less boundaryless.²⁹

The accumulation of symbolic and social capital mostly comes down to chasing gatekeepers. This is a vital part of the production process, because these gatekeepers can offer studio space, co-production budgets, and the opportunity to present creations. This particular chase comes hand in hand with identity work, which requires skill and competence in personal branding and self-promotion. Additionally, the endless networking becomes a type of extended courtship,³⁰ especially with programmers from venues or residency spaces, involving several communication tactics during the process of selling either a new project or an existing production. Unfortunately, not only do the endless networking attempts and self-promoting pitches often remain vain efforts, the time spent on these activities threatens to restrict the time available for experimentation in the studio.

²⁹. Hesters, p. 117.

³⁰. This term is introduced by one of my (anonymous) interviewees.

On the macrolevel, contemporary dance artists have to cope with the bureaucracy that comes hand in hand with autonomous work both before, during and after the production process. In terms of social security, Belgium and Germany have quite distinctive freelancing systems in the independent arts sector. In Belgium, artists commonly work with short employment contracts, whereas artists in Germany are generally self-employed. Furthermore, both Belgium and Germany have established interesting schemes that specifically support artists. The ‘artist status’ in Belgium makes it possible to attain employee status in a freelance work regime by allowing artists to work with short employment contracts. The consequential coverage of periods of non-employment through steady unemployment allowances is the most important benefit of this regime, since it creates a situation of stable income between short-term contracts. This kind of safety net is crucial, especially since most artists keep on practicing their profession in a situation of non-employment. However, only half of the respondents within my study in Brussels have access to this status. In comparison, self-employed artists in Berlin can apply for membership at the *Künstlersozialkasse* (further referred to as KSK), which coordinates the transfer of contributions for its members to a health insurance plan of the members’ choice, to a statutory pension and to long-term care insurances. Most Berlin-based respondents within my study were members of the KSK. However, while membership reduces the high costs for mandatory insurances for self-employed artists, it only covers very basic insurances. It does not reduce socio-economic precarity in a significant way, because these monthly costs remain high in relation to the low average monthly incomes of the artists within my study in Germany.³¹

³¹. See esp. Van Assche, pp. 187-194.

Furthermore, the described residency system engenders significant transnational mobility, especially within Europe, that comes hand in hand with chasing papers. In the performing arts field, such transnational mobility is not necessarily unique, as an essential part of the profession entails taking a production on tour. However, within the contemporary dance field, we could probably speak of a deterritorialisation of the work process, due to the decoupling of conception, production (in various residencies) and presentation (in other venues). It remains important to acknowledge that, in contradistinction to many other professions (even including several performing arts professions, such as text-based acting), dance artists are particularly transnationally mobile. In other mobile performing arts branches — such as opera or ballet, for instance — conception, production and presentation are generally coupled to one foreign location for a reasonable period of time. In contrast, residencies in contemporary dance are generally brief and dispersed in space, while the research (conceptual and studio work) does not necessarily lead to the presentation of an outcome. Due to technological acceleration, international dance artists do not have to rely solely on resources from their base country for their projects, but find infrastructure, co-production budgets, artistic collaborations and presentation opportunities across borders. This also occurs because their mode of expression is more broadly accessible than that of text-based performance artists. In *Impediments to Mobility: Possible Solutions*, Richard Poláček lists all the frameworks — in other words the social security systems — for independent performing artists working within Europe, in view of a harmonised European solution that would make it simpler for arts profession-

³². Richard Poláček, *Study on Impediments to Mobility in the EU Live Performance Sector and on Possible Solutions* (Brussels: PEARLE, Finnish Theater Information Centre, IETM, 2007).

als to be mobile and work in various countries.³² The differences between national social security systems in European (and even more so in non-European) countries still cause problems relating to accessibility and the portability of rights (such as a retirement pension or support

for career change). Poláček addresses three main issues: first, the possession of a work and/or residence permit (or visa); second, the lack of coordination between the different social security systems; and third, the necessity of various, or double, tax declarations.³³ In other words, the different work economies dealt with during one production process cause manifold problems requiring paperwork.

As a consequence of the bureaucratic freelancing systems, the public funding systems dominated by project subsidies, and the transnational mobility caused by the residency system, contemporary dance artists have to juggle a fair amount of paperwork. This may lead to the colonisation of the artistic by non-artistic burdens both before, during, and after a production process. This situation does not occur, for instance, within dance companies where artistic collaboration (between dancer and choreographer) is ‘organisationally purified from everything economic by transferring this “impurity” to a purely managerial body’, as Laermans puts it.³⁴ Contemporary dance artists whose work is generally project-based rarely experience this purification and, if they do at all come to this, through arrangements with workspaces or alternative management bureaus, such that this purification remains only partial. Furthermore, within the economic domain, part of the non-artistic work is directly connected with the artistic (such as working on a production budget or scheduling rehearsals and performances), something which should be distinguished from the administrative and organisational burden of the work environment and its complexity due to transnational mobility and the neoliberal, project-based work regime (such as applying for work permits or dealing with issues about benefits or taxes). Alarming, the resulting lack of time for creative-productive work in the studio puts a strain on the artistic work, engendering artistic limitations. This *creative fire alarm* is also reflected in the results of my quantitative studies in European dance hubs Brussels (2016) and

³³. *Ibid*, p. 8.

³⁴. Laermans, p. 307.

Berlin (2017):³⁵ on average, 47% of the *entire work time budget* of the Brussels-based respondents was spent on creative-productive activities, which equates to almost two-thirds of their *artistic time budget* (comprising creative-productive work and the other administrative-organisational tasks related to artistic activities, see figure A.1.). In Berlin, on average a mere 30% of the *entire time budget for work* can be devoted to creative and productive activities, which is slightly over half of the *artistic time budget* (see figure A.2.). Additionally, it should be kept in mind that this does not necessarily mean that artists are being paid for time spent working on these creative-productive activities within their artistic labour time. Here, we stumble upon the paradox of how more autonomy in fact produces more work, as Kunst also points out in her book's conclusion: artistic work is 'at the core of the twisted ideological relationship between work and freedom; cynically, the work that comes across as the freest is the work that is completely fused with life. The work considered free is the kind whose level of dedication and intensity leaves no further room for life'.³⁶

This brief outline reveals that the artist's creative process in the studio is only one part of the puzzle. The microworld of the studio is inextricably linked to the mesoworld in which artists constantly manoeuvre between institutions, on which they are deeply dependent, and the macroworld that provides the socio-economic and socio-political context that enables them to work professionally in the first place.

This causes a very dispersed focus: the artist's process is fragmented

in time (an accumulation of rehearsal periods), in place (an accumulation of rehearsal locations), and in its content (an accumulation of non- and para-artistic work). In this acceleration society, many projects may also (partly) overlap, which certainly does not assist with focus.

³⁵. See esp. Van Assche, pp. 50-68.

³⁶. Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015), p. 190.

Bits and pieces: From studio to stage

In the project-based contemporary dance field, creative work in the studio is thus acutely affected by the inclusive production process I have described. The dispersed focus, timing, and location of the creative process may result in the realisation of semi-finished pieces, which become refined and finalised only while on tour — that is, if they manage to go on tour at all after their premiere. Indeed, we encounter more *disposable* dance productions that disappear after their premiere, something which has little to do with the artistic quality or public appeal of the work, instead being a systemic problem, as Pieter T'Jonck also notes.³⁷ This can be explained, in part, by the fact that the responsibility for disseminating a production too often rests on the artist's shoulders, and because project subsidies sponsor the creation of a production rather than its distribution. The distribution problem ties in with questions of sustainability: if the work is not seen by others but remains a mayfly, then what are we working for?

The lack of time available to experiment in the studio may also cause artists to remain in their comfort zones, rehashing former material into new pieces. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Igor Koruga's solo performance *Streamlined* recycles substantial text material from the group performance *Temporaries*, created two years earlier. Susanne Foellmer and Richard Gough have, in fact, dedicated an entire issue of *Performance Research* to the phenomenon of reusing artistic leftovers.³⁸ The issue addresses the multifaceted understanding of leftovers in the arts and artistic practice. The submissions to this issue explore the politicality of leftovers, ranging

³⁷. T'Jonck, p.23.

³⁸. Susanne Foellmer and Richard Gough, 'Before Left Over', *Performance Research*, 22.8 (2017), 1-6.

from questions of sustainability and ecological issues to recycling as a cultural or urban necessity. Fortunately, several of the articles in this issue demonstrate that recycling unused leftovers from former artistic processes, or rehashing former material into new pieces, can also result in very exciting works of art. However, it should be observed that the lack of consistent time in a consistent studio may also cause a decline in the quality of the productions we see on stage, as the consequential *rehashing* may result in *déjà-vu*.

Furthermore, in terms of product quality, this fragmented work process may lead to the production of tactical, marketable and adaptable pieces. When moving from residency to residency during the creative process, visions of large sets and ambitious props soon evaporate. Even the need for a different colour dancefloor can quickly become quite an organisational burden and an expensive endeavour. Additionally, the less people involved, the cheaper the creative process and performance become. In precarious times, the choreographer therefore often decides to perform in the work itself; this reduces the labour costs during the process and performance fee, because the contemporary dance profession is grounded in living labour. However, this situation may also impede the creative process, as the external perspective and sole focus on the performers disappears when the choreographer becomes a multitasker. The preferred situation of being ‘on the outside’ and paying oneself as a choreographer has simply become too expensive, which is also one of the reasons why we see so many solos on stage. Conversely, artists may be inspired to develop work modes that require less rehearsal time in a studio, for example establishing a creative process that does not require being together in a studio. Within my study, for example, I followed a work process that was entirely based on back-and-forth communication over Skype. The two performers only came together in an actual studio the week before the presentation. Not only is this a tactical working mode, which avoids travel and costs for rehearsal time and space, it is also a more environmentally conscious one.

This article reveals that the colonisation of the artistic by the non-artistic and the dispersed focus of the artistic production process (induced by the project and residency system in which it takes place) threaten product quality. The vain efforts involved in chasing your own tail may lead not only artists, but also production processes, to burn out. Burn-out is the final stage of a lengthy process of overburdening, especially prevalent in professions which involve what Sergio Bologna terms ‘relational labour’³⁹ and among people who are very involved with, and exceptionally motivated by, work. Commonly, burnout strikes people who start work with high expectations and drive that makes them vulnerable to disappointment. Contemporary dance artists generally match this description. Sociologist Pierre-Emmanuel Sorignet, for example, emphasises that contemporary dance artists construct a habitus where work time and private life are closely intertwined or, perhaps better, one in which life and work even depend on one another.⁴⁰ Put differently, dance artists strive for enrichment instead of material richness, and seek this in the form of self-development. In a related vein, Pierre-Michel Menger points out that taking the risk of venturing into uncertain but creative professions is encouraged by the hope of gaining social and psychological gratification, the prospect of autonomous working conditions, and the absence of dull and routine work.⁴¹ However, there often comes a point in the chase after means I have depicted here, when contemporary dance artists realise that they give more than they can take — quite reminiscent of Wile E Coyote’s chase, who never seems to get anywhere. In a similar vein to Berlant’s process of ‘slow death’, many dance artists — and cultural and arts workers in general — endure this situation and go on with working and living (or in her words, reproducing

³⁹. See Sergio Bologna, *Die Zerstörung Der Mittelschichten: Thesen Zur Neuen Selbständigkeit* (Graz: Nausner & Nausner, 2006).

⁴⁰. Pierre-Emmanuel Sorignet, *Danser: enquête dans les coulisses d’une vocation* [Dancing. Inquiry Behind the Scenes of a Vocation] (Paris: La Découverte, 2010).

⁴¹. Pierre-Michel Menger, *The Economics of Creativity: Art and Achievement under Uncertainty* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014).

life) for too long. An increasing number of people in the arts are wearing out, both physically and mentally.⁴² Artists within my study have signalled that they barely have time left to actually work on making art and that they often do not feel like an artist. Most significantly, this general lack of time for creative work, regulated in limited time blocks, undermines the quality of the dance pieces themselves: we see productions premiere that are not quite finished yet; we see recycled material reappear on stage over and over again; we see a surfeit of solo work; we notice that pieces respond to certain popular trends yet hardly knock us off our feet. Alarmingly, the dance field becomes fragmented: a variety of semi-finished dance productions are created in bits and pieces and rarely make it to more than one stage.

Nonetheless, contemporary dance productions touched by this dispersed production process are not always affected by a decline in quality. In fact, some are very powerful, provocative and ingenious works of art. Koruga's *Streamlined*, for example, is a self-reflective performance that uses humour and irony as a restorative and political device. He not only criticises the conditions of his own production process, but also subverts his apparently personal issues in an ironic act, by making it public. This proves that artists are indeed more than capable of producing high quality art under precarious circumstances. However, this is quite a *dangerous statement* because this realisation may well be abused on the

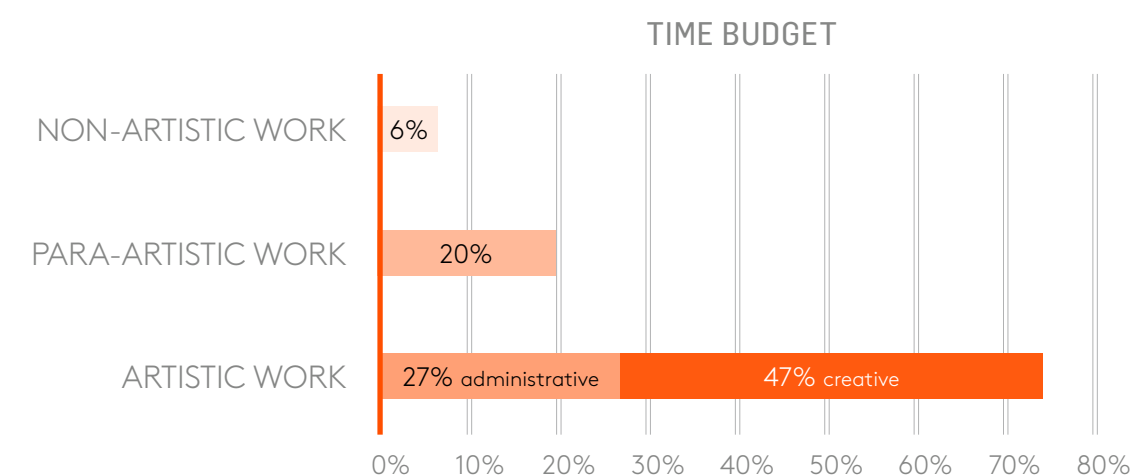
mesoeconomic or macroeconomic level, which should by all means be avoided. Yet, herein lies the ultimate paradox, which remains unsolved even at the end of this article: if some of the best artworks were created in very precarious conditions, why should governments continue to subsidise the making of art? In fact, artists are very capable of producing high quality work, without sufficient means, and in production processes

⁴². See for example Bieke Purnelle, 'Burn-out in de kunsten: de kwaal van een sector?', *Rekto:Verso* (2017). Published electronically 18.09.2017 or Emke Idema, 'Burn-out: Emancipatie van het menszijn', *Rekto:Verso* (2018). Published electronically 02.08.2018.

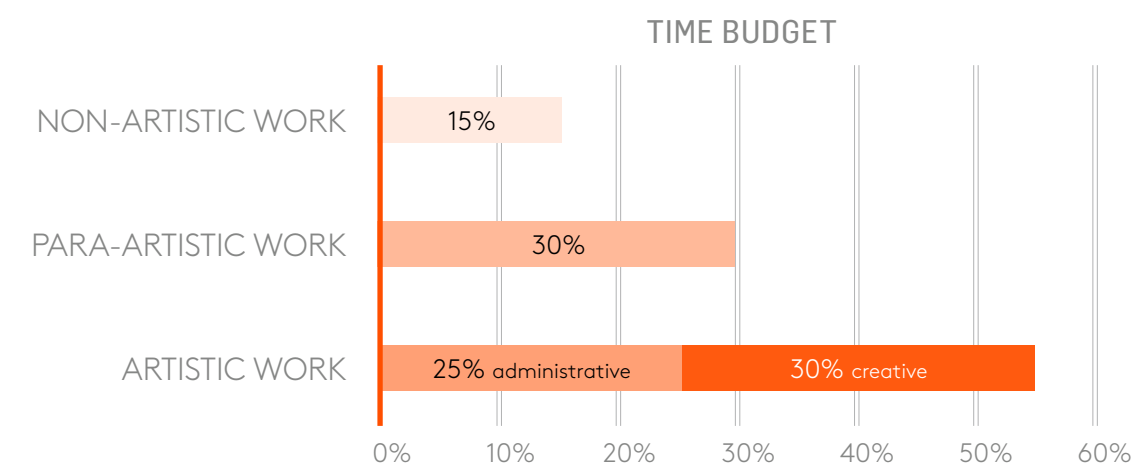
scattered over time and space. Regrettably, governing bodies are, of course, aware of this strength; this very fact turns it into the artist's weakness, undermining the urgency to improve current conditions, at least from the perspective of the governing bodies. Yet, this is not an excuse to disregard and discredit all the *work* that goes into an *artwork*.

FIGURE A: Average percentage of time spent on artistic, para-artistic and non-artistic work

A.1. BRUSSELS-BASED RESPONDENTS (N = 94)



A.2. BERLIN-BASED RESPONDENTS (N = 63)



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