Living up to a Bohemian Work Ethic
Balancing Autonomy and Risk in the Symbolic Economy of the Performing Arts

1. Introduction

In Europe, performing artists – not unlike many other art workers – are typically hopping from one project to another, juggling with temporary contracts topped up with countless hours of unpaid labor (e.g. T'Jonck 2013 and Laermans 2015 on the Brussels scene; Jeschonnek 2010 on the Berlin scene). Aspiring a career in the performing arts is thus risky business: one has a fair chance to end up in a situation of marked precarity over a longer period of time (e.g. Abbing 2008, Menger 2014, McRobbie 2016). Precarious work has been defined as the work that is 'uncertain, unstable, and insecure' and in which the workers themselves 'bear the risks of work' (see esp. Kalleberg and Vallas 2017, 1). Recent research has shown that precarity in the arts has a 'plural character' (Van Assche 2020, 267). This 'multiple precarization' (Garcia Diaz and Gielen 2018, 170) includes, but may not be limited to, socio-economic precarity, political precarity, physical precarity and mental precarity.

In this article, we try to elucidate what these multiple risks entail within a particular context of artistic production, i.e. the field of contemporary dance. Drawing on a longitudinal study on the work of contemporary dance artists in Brussels and Berlin, we analyze how multifaceted precarity is macro- and meso-governed by existing structures and micro-managed by agents. We particularly focus on how the studied dance artists negotiate between economic and artistic risks. The deployed strategies, thus we contend, allow broader tentative conclusions on the intersection of autonomy and heteronomy within the European context of the meanwhile institutionalized neoliberal regime of flexible artistic accumulation, characterized by instable project work (Laermans, 2015, 291-293). In presenting our results, we regularly make links with more general concepts and insights. However, we deliberately refrain from theoretical considerations that we cannot anchor in our data, which evidently have their limits.

Between 2014 and 2018, we conducted quantitative as well as longitudinal qualitative research in the contemporary dance worlds of Brussels and Berlin. We prefer to speak of autonomously working artists rather than independent, since the vast majority of these 'project workers' remain dependent on a variety of institutions ranging from funding bodies over production houses to theater venues. Differently put, a career in the performing arts tends to develop between institutions rather than within one and the competences and requirements to uphold such an inter-organizational career drift between independent and dependent work. In accordance with the discussion by Boltanski and Chiapello of 'the new spirit of capitalism' (2005), the studied dance artists alternate projects in which they take up the position of choreographer and performer respectively; their navigation between projects relies on social networking and personal artistic aspirations. However, the way they can manage economic and artistic precarities also depends on the macro-context defined by national social and cultural policies (compare Kleppe, 2017 on the working conditions in three major theaters in the UK, the Netherlands and Norway). Precisely in this respect, our comparison between Brussels and Berlin based contemporary dance artists is quite instructive. The policy differences informing both art worlds, particularly those regarding the profession of performing artist, have marked

effects on dancers' precarity management and the ways they deal with socio-economic and artistic risks.

Notwithstanding the notable effects of the different socio-economic macro structures in Brussels and Berlin respectively, our data show that the studied dance artists share a *bohemian work ethic* framed by a more general symbolic economy. The latter informs in an encompassing way their art, labor and life. Overall, the uncovered symbolic economy even seems to have a greater impact on artistic and economic risk-taking than the specific social security policy and welfare approaches co-structuring the Brussels and Berlin dance field respectively. While the bohemian ethos traditionally implied an anti-work attitude (Halasz 2015), we propose the term *bohemian work ethic* to describe an underlying logic according to which performing artists operate within this symbolic economy that, instead, involves a strenuous work ethic. Within this logic, bohemian values such as autonomy, artistic pleasure, lifelong learning, self-development and self-realization compensate for the multifaceted precarious working conditions and insecure future prospects.

2. Materials and Methodology

2.1. Dance as Work: measuring challenges

Both Brussels and Berlin attract a high number of international dance artists in the pursuit of their artistic careers. Even a superficial peek into both art worlds suggests that most of its members are in a precarious professional situation. For example, it is widely known that many contemporary dance artists move back and forth between different places in Europe due to international co-productions, temporary residencies, or when touring their pieces (T'Jonck 2013; Laermans 2015; Van Assche 2020). Yet what about the broader picture of multiple precarity?

In the Flemish[1] context, professional trajectories within the performing arts have been the subject of empirical research that has predominantly focused on actors or performing artists as a comprehensive category; only rarely contemporary dance artists are studied as a separate entity (see esp. Bresseleers 2012; Siongers et al 2016). In the German context, the report by Jeschonnek (2010) contains relevant empirical data on the socio-economic position of performing artists, again as a wide-ranging group. Besides this report, especially the study on fair practices in the performing arts and music by Norz (2016) forms an apt starting point for situating precarity in the German performing arts sector. However, the dance profession is again notably absent (compare Sabisch 2017, 57).

[1] Belgium has a complex federal structure in which several governments are active. In addition to the national level, Belgium is divided into three territorial regions: the Walloon Region (the southern, French-speaking part), the Flemish Region (the northern, Dutch-speaking part) and the Brussels-Capital Region (bi-lingual). The regions are primarily responsible for economic matters. Moreover, Belgium is also divided into three Communities on the basis of language; hence the Flemish, French and German-speaking Communities, which have person- or language-related competences, such as for education, health, welfare and culture. Since 1970, art policy is thus the responsibility of the Flemish Community, which includes the Dutch-speaking inhabitants of the Flemish Region and Brussels-Capital Region. In this article, we focus on data related to the Flemish Community and not to Belgium as a whole. The Flemish Community also provides the largest and most frequently used forms of artistic funding in Brussels.

Drawing on the just mentioned studies, we first set up an e-survey to get a more empirically grounded status quo on the two contemporary dance hubs. Following Menger's observations (2001), we reconsidered several dependent variables (such as employment relationships and income indicators) and reformulated them in function of the targeted field. Since we could not base our survey on studies that considered the contemporary dance profession as a separate entity, we tested the survey with field inhabitants (dance practitioners as well as facilitators) to verify its viability in our field of inquiry. The first survey was distributed within the Brussels dance scene in spring 2015 through an extended mailing list. A year later, the second survey was spread twice through a call for participation by 5 major dance institutions in Berlin; however, we had only limited control over this distribution due to their strict privacy regulations. The analysis was done on 94 valid forms in Brussels and 63 in Berlin.

It merits mention that assembling quantitative data always is a challenging assignment when entering the realm of contingent work. Thus, Hans Abbing notes that the main problem is how to count artists, since 1) diplomas do not reveal who is a professional artist, 2) many professional artists are self-employed and unaffiliated, and 3) many earn most of their income from second jobs and therefore do not appear in statistics (2008, 132). It goes without saying that measuring the size of our specific population was not evident. On top of this initial obstacle, the flexible and project-based organization of the contemporary dance profession also challenges conventional survey methods as sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger discusses in-depth in his article *Artists as Workers: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges* (2001). Indeed, 'extensive job and sectoral mobility as well as multiple job holding considerably affect the use of conventional work and unemployment indicators' (2001, 246). Considering these measuring challenges, we conclude that our quantitative research design was based on self-selection and self-definition, implying that the presented results have an exploratory character and must therefore be interpreted with caution.[2] However, this was not really a serious shortcoming since we had the intention to employ the quantitative data as a starting point and a tool to facilitate the selection of qualitative case study candidates.[3]

In the next phase, we indeed undertook ethnographic fieldwork to explore more in-depth the multidimensional precarity and more complex issues the survey findings revealed (see esp. Van Assche 2018 on the Brussels survey findings). In order to do this properly, we spent nine months observing, participating and following seven case study informants in the Brussels contemporary dance scene and thereafter in Berlin. As part of the fieldwork, we conducted in total 52 longitudinal semi-structured in-depth interviews with the fourteen informants. Additionally, we undertook participant observations in the studio while informants were working on their own creative processes and we asked them to keep a logbook that documented at least two weeks of activities in and outside the studio. Within the interpretive

[2] This article is part of a more comprehensive comparative study, of which the methodological approach has been discussed in detail (Van Assche and Laermans 2016; Van Assche and Laermans 2017; Van Assche 2020). For the purpose of this article we therefore chose to remain brief yet transparent in our methodological outline.

[3] For a more detailed overview of the research design and the survey findings in Brussels and Berlin, please consult the descriptive reports available online *(*Van Assche and Laermans 2016; Van Assche and Laermans 2017*)* and an analysis of the results from Brussels (Van Assche 2018)

Weberian tradition, our aim was to reconstruct how contemporary dance artists observe their work reality and what meanings they give to it and to their actions through the lens of our sample[4]. Whereas the survey allowed us to collect strictly recorded data to create a status quo, the essence of the qualitative approach was the continual interweaving of the data collection and theory development. We are of course aware of the relatively small size of our sample, yet both the comparative and longitudinal nature of our fieldwork exposed a high consistency in behavioral patterns.

2.2. Dance as Work: the macro and meso level

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 generally work self-employed. All in all, in the performing arts sector in Belgium, the term *freelance work* indeed relates to project work legally framed by contracts with employers. Most artists manage their contracts via structurally funded institutions, such as alternative management bureaus, workspaces, or pay roll agencies. By contrast, artists working under the self-employed status are rare in Flanders but most common in Berlin. Consequently, in the Brussels-Capital Region employers are obliged to follow the official wage scales of the Collective Labor Agreement (CLA) for Performing Arts, while regulations for minimum standard fees do not exist for performing artists in Germany. However, a recommendation for a minimum standard fee for freelance performing artists was composed in 2015, which serves as a guideline rather than a legal obligation.[5] In comparison in Brussels, the CLA for Performing Arts acknowledges the contingent nature of the work through offering adapted wage scales for employment contracts less than four months.[6] Particularly the obligation to pay an employee according to seniority significantly contributes to the recognition of an artist's work in the form of a pay raise, but needless to say that in a freelance work regime the notion of seniority has become a *zombie concept*, a construct that does no longer refer to the invoked social reality (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The mere fact that the minimum standard fee in Berlin is recommended regardless of age or work experience effectively proves the notion's redundancy.

Additionally, both Belgium and Germany have established social security schemes that specifically support artists. In Belgium, the so-called artist status enables the application of the employee status in a freelance work regime. This status comes with several employee benefits,

[4] While Brussels and Berlin were essentially the informants' base cities, the informants were not necessarily bound to this context. In total, we included seven different nationalities and all the informants were active in contemporary dance on a global scale. The selected variables for the construction of these profiles were based on theoretical criteria derived from the aforementioned studies among others and the quantitative data. All informants remain anonymous, therefore we do not systematically give descriptive demographic or other specifics whenever we make use of direct quotations unless necessary for the argument.

[5] At the time of our survey, the recommended monthly fee amounted to 2,000 euros gross for freelance artists with insurance obligation through the Artist's Social Fund (KSK) and 2,500 euros gross for non-member and was reconsidered in 2017 to respectively 2,300 and 2,660 euros.

[6] It should be noted that it is therefore not mandatory to follow these wage scales in the French Community of Belgium. At the time of administering the Brussels survey in 2015, a career starter received a minimum of 1,766.25 euros gross and the income increases with about 8% after five years of working experience and with 28% after 15 years.

with the coverage of periods of non-employment through steady unemployment allowances being the most important advantage because it creates a situation of stable income between short-term contracts. This is a crucial safety net for most artists who keep on practicing their profession in a situation of non-employment. Therefore, acquiring the artist status should be considered as obtaining access to a flexicurity provision or a form of indirect personal funding. However, only 53% of the Brussels based respondents in our quantitative survey have access to this status, which means that it is relatively exclusive and very conditional: those with access are generally older and have more work experience. This has to do with the specific requirements to acquire this status, such as the proof of a sufficient income from artistic work.

In comparison, self-employed artists in Berlin can apply for membership at the Kunstler Sozialkasse or Artist's Social Fund (hereafter referred to as KSK), which coordinates the transfer of contributions for its members to the health insurance of the members' choice and to statutory pension and long-term care insurances. The members only have to pay half of the contributions due and the KSK covers the rest. In other words, the state funds self-employed artists with reductions on social insurance. Most survey respondents in Berlin are registered with the KSK, so it is not as restricted as the Belgian artist status. Yet, while the KSK may reduce the high costs in social security associated with self-employment in Germany, this system does not reduce socio-economic precarity in a significant way. For example, the KSK does not offer unemployment allowances, although artists could possibly apply for the quite rigid German living wage known as Hartz IV. However, among other obligations, unemployed living wage receivers must accept *any* job offered by the job center, which is not the case in Belgium where unemployed artists with the artist status may refuse non-artistic jobs without endangering their allowances.

In terms of financial support, both capitals have implemented quite a similar funding system, dominated by project-based subsidies for artists and structurally based subsidies for art institutions and a relatively small number of dance companies. In Brussels, public funding for the performing arts comes from the Flemish Government and is relatively generous when compared to Berlin. The dance population in Brussels is much smaller and the larger dance companies apply for structural subsidies, thus not being a competitive threat to the project-based artists. In Berlin, on the contrary, all field players generally have to eat from one and the same subsidy pot. In addition, Flanders (including Brussels) has established a very generous network of well-equipped workspaces that offer studio space free of charge within a reasonable commute. Because these institutions are structurally supported, they can offer the artists in temporary residency accommodation, technical support, meals and sometimes even a (co-)production budget. In Berlin, less dance-specific studio space is available and, moreover, this space oftentimes comes with a relatively high rent price. Even when an artist's work is co-produced by an organization, artists may have to pay renting costs for the use of their studio (perhaps at a reduced rate). Hence, acquiring an affordable dance-specific studio space within a reasonable commute becomes quite a challenge without subsidies.

Although both European cities attract a high number of contemporary dance artists from around the globe and the conditions at the macro and meso level seem quite favorable, the contemporary dance profession in both locales seen through the lens of the survey respondents is marked by a multifaceted socio-economic precarity. In both cities, most respondents

combine being performer with other related main occupations (such as choreographer) and they held multiple jobs when they took the survey. In Brussels, where contemporary dance artists commonly work with short-employment contracts under the employee status, the median of average monthly income (of all income streams) lies within the category of 1,000 and 1,250 euros net. This is significantly lower than the indicated monthly minimum wage on the CLA for Performing Arts, which started counting from a gross income of 1,766.25 euros per month in 2015 when employing an artist with no prior work experience. For a single employee living alone without children and working full-time this would amount to ca. 1,460 euros net. According to the official statistics[7], comparatively, the average gross salary of an employee in Belgium in 2015 amounted to 3,445 euros per month, which converts to ca. 2,190 euros per month net.

Since Berlin respondents are predominantly self-employed freelancers, we asked them to estimate the average year income divided by twelve without deducting insurance costs. They indicated an average gross monthly income (of all income streams) between 750 and 1,000 euros (median). This is between half and less than half of the recommended monthly fee of 2,000 euros gross (with KSK) or 2,500 euros gross (without KSK). In comparison to the average monthly salary in Germany[8], which amounted to 3,428 euros in 2016, these results are painstakingly low. Thus, the Berlin data reveal slightly lower incomes than the Brussels data, especially when bearing in mind that the Berlin-based respondents still need to pay rather high contributions to their mandatory insurances (plus taxes). Additionally, 62% of the Berlin-respondents indicate that they are remunerated for maximally half of their actual working hours, whereas in Brussels this is only true for 46% of the respondents. These estimated incomes in both cases certainly seem meager in the light of the reported high education level and the reported actual working hours. Hence, we can indeed speak of status inconsistency. Accordingly, the biggest issue seems to be the absence of fair payment for the delivered work effort.

Backed by these quantitative findings, we can develop a more profound look into the art worlds within which these performing artists maneuver between projects and institutions. More particularly, we will examine how the Brussels and the Berlin context functions at the intersection of the micro, meso and macro level.

3. Results

3.1 Bohemian Work Ethic

In urban and cultural studies, the position of *living like an artist* is often referred to as a bohemian lifestyle, or what Richard Lloyd has termed a 'bohemian ethic' in his empirical study of artists in Chicago (2010). He notes that only a minority pursue *la vie bohème* into their thirties. However, most of our survey respondents and fieldwork informants are well into their

[7] The statistics can be consulted on the following webpage: https://statbel.fgov.be/en/news/overview-belgian-wages-and-salaries-0

[8] The statistics can be consulted: https://www.statista.com/statistics/416207/average-annual-wages-germany-y-on-y-in-euros/

thirties, several even in their forties; their meager monthly average incomes suggest that they still pursue what Lloyd depicts as a neo-bohemian lifestyle. That means that well beyond their thirties, our sample population still works contingently, which is partly due to the increasingly difficult access to long-term socially secure jobs in the arts in particular and in neoliberal post-Fordism in general. Nonetheless, the question whether this is either coercion (induced by the state or market) or a (voluntary made) choice should be reassessed.

Artists and creative professionals indeed value the relatively autonomous lifestyle that comes with freelance work, which makes them – at least partly – willing to lead a precarious but creative life. Thus, an informant describes the situation in Berlin as one of 'an extended youth […] in which freedom trumps income'. Furthermore, our quantitative findings suggest that the respondents seem to compensate the shortage of material benefits with other currencies. In both locales, they seem (very) satisfied about the substantive aspects of the profession. In either case, no significant relations result from the comparison of the satisfaction level and the average income categories, which might indicate that professional satisfaction does not seem to depend directly on monetary income. This finding confirms a tendency toward *self-precarization*: a willingness to sacrifice material benefits that is driven by a multifaceted immaterial income, such as the benefits of a relatively autonomous life dedicated to artistic preoccupations and an 'expressive individualism' (see also Lorey 2006, Laermans 2015 and Brook et al. 2020). This argument is especially convincing in combination with the reported top motives for being active within the field of contemporary dance in both cities, i.e. the immaterial currencies of artistic pleasure, lifelong learning and self-development. Also our fieldwork has exposed our informants' *voluntary* adoption of relative poverty in exchange for an increase in autonomy and creativity. But what does that mean precisely? How *voluntary* is this adoption truly?

We contend that a sole *bohemian* ethic is probably too strong a term since it implies the rejection of any economically driven behavior. While our qualitative findings confirm that artists often endure their working and living conditions out of a strong belief in their own autonomy and the value of self-realization, our fieldwork also reveals that self-promotion, multiple jobholding, and self-management are an actual necessity to survive as an artist. As their logbooks reveal, most informants in fact spend more time on these activities than artistic ones. Although artists' lives may seem intrinsically connected with *the bohemian*, we claim this is overall a surface-effect: it is in fact work (rather than art) that dominates the informants' lives these days. Hence, we prefer to speak of a *bohemian work ethic* prevalent among the studied contemporary dance artists. This concept can possibly be generalized as a habitus according to which most project-based workers, particularly artists and other cultural producers, tend to act at the intersection of work, life and art making. For that matter, the term includes two oxymoronic notions: the choice for an autonomous lifestyle as an artist, but simultaneously the ambiguous acknowledgement that this comes hand in hand with actual work to ensure one's survival in the art world. Nonetheless, the notion of *bohemian* can still be applied to the work ethic in reference to the already indicated self-precarization, testifying that performing artists are to a certain extent willing to sacrifice material income for the sake of immaterial income. Indeed, the values and motives for making art in contemporary neoliberal

times have remained the same as back in nineteenth-century bohemianism: artistic pleasure, temporal autonomy, lifelong learning prospects, a relatively free work environment, opportunities for self-development and self-realization, among other things.

In our fieldwork intrinsic motivation and immaterial income indeed seem to compensate for monetary rewards (compare Sorignet 2010 and Brook et al. 2020). The related habitus is one in which life and work depend on one another. Instead of a material richness, dance artists strive for enrichment in the form of self-development and self-realization. These latter values help to understand the widespread self-precarization among the queried artists. The desire to grow and to express the self seems to be at the core of the willingness to work un(der)paid: several informants are quite happy to work together on a project even though they are un(der)paid, because they want to explore the potential of the collaboration that promises to provide immaterial income. Yet, the notion of immaterial may be somewhat misleading here: any work is ultimately an "indissoluble continuity between the corporeal and cognitive capacities of the human subject" (see esp. Deranty 2010, 181). Especially in dance, where working (together) implies body work, besides the immaterial (or psychic) income, the promised rewards may be material or physical, i.e. the corporeal pleasures of dancing. Thus, the physical and psychological artistic pleasures alongside the possibility to work autonomously and actualize one's self make our informants quite prepared to *self-precarize*.

The autonomy suggested by the notion of bohemian is to a great extent an imagined autonomy because in reality the performing artist is confronted with a work pressure that is deeply interwoven with life. *Work* even slowly drains the *bohemian* because, paradoxically, more autonomy seems to come with more work. Thus, autonomously producing a performance entails, among other things, writing a dossier with a conceptual and a business plan, scheduling rehearsals, hiring performers and technicians, location and equipment hunting, and so on. Ultimately, *contemporary* dance artists are often merely *temporary* dance artists, who are taking up many other job descriptions including human resources, financial management, production, among other things, to be able to actually dance from time to time. Basically, it entails a simultaneity of financial, administrative and organizational management quite in line with neoliberal ideology, which David Harvey defines as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that the human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills' (2007, 3; compare Bröckling 2016 on 'the entrepreneurial self').

Moreover, we distinguished in our research activities that are not directly work-related but are part of the respondents' bohemian work ethic as these tend to feed the artistic work and cannot be discussed as separate entities. Most of these activities are part of maintaining the body capital of our informants or expanding their cultural capital, such as practicing yoga, playing an instrument or reading philosophy texts (much contemporary dance practices are multi-disciplinary and inspired by theoretical insights). Within the bohemian work ethic, we hence stumble upon the 'twisted ideological relationship between work and freedom' as Bojana Kunst puts it:

> 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. (2015, 190)

In addition, within the bohemian work ethic artists working on project-basis are regularly obliged to tap into other incomes to provide and make a living (Menger 2001, 247; Abbing 2008, 143). Since artists cannot always count on receiving subsidies for their projects, they must hedge against income insecurity through multiple jobholding. Appropriately, Hans Abbing observed that artists in fact 'give large amounts of money to the arts by funneling income from second jobs, allowances, or inheritances into the arts' (2008, 46), a phenomenon that our empirical study confirms and which can be understood as a form of internal subsidization. The concept refers to a form of cross-financing when income stemming from one activity is used to finance a loss-making activity within the same enterprise. In doing so, artists become some of the most important art subsidizers operating within an upside-down economy.

In taking up second jobs, artists are not only selective but also eager to give them up when possible. David Throsby (1994) has therefore introduced the 'work-preference model of artist behavior,' which premises a survival constraint among artists. This should be interpreted as a minimum income zone, in which money rapidly loses its importance: as soon as a minimum level is reached, artists quickly lose interest in earning more money and prefer to spend more time making art (see also Abbing 2008, 85). Throsby refers to multiple jobholding as having an 'overall utility function for artists', thus suggesting that where the money to achieve this minimum level comes from is not so important (1994, 77). However, our data reveal that multiple jobholding happens to a large extent within the sector itself: ideally it concerns work that is consistent with one's lifestyle (e.g., teaching yoga or Pilates) on the one hand or services within the arts sector that allow artists to put their social and cultural capital to good use (e.g., translation for program folders, bar tending in a theater venue) on the other. Our informants are generally not willing to take up just any kind of side job, because – as also Menger stresses – when these jobs are *too* non-artistic, multiple jobholding will lead to alienation (2014, 125).

Overall, we observe that labor-related income sources tend to be derived from second jobs that can in one way or another enhance one's employability. For example, while regular bartending is often not so easily combinable with a career in dance because of the difficulty to combine the late hours with early dance training, bartending in the foyer of a theater venue can be consistent with the lifestyle: not only does it enable easy and cheap access to performances of peers, artists can also accumulate social capital as the foyer serves as a meeting place for important gatekeepers. Moreover, foyer bars tend to close at a more decent hour. These nuances concerning the income sources to achieve the minimum level remain largely underexplored in Throsby's work preference model. The latter is also somewhat outdated since Throsby assumes that performing artists typically spend long periods of time out of work simply because 'none is available' (1994, 79). However, in the contemporary dance scenes of Brussels and Berlin, the majority of performing artists need to (and/or want to) make their own opportunities as they work project-based. Nevertheless, overall the observed behavior is largely consistent with

Throsby's model and confirms the idea of the 'exceptional economy of the arts' (Abbing 2008) in which artists look for money in order to be able to work and not vice versa. Or, to repeat the well-known words of Pierre Bourdieu, we are dealing with 'the economic world reversed' (1983), in which money is a means and not an end.

3.2. A social production system

In line with 'the new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005), the search for work opportunities in the performing arts is accompanied by maintaining a network of professional contacts. We can relate these network-oriented work to Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of different forms of capital (1986), in which he 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 institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (1986, 247). Contemporary dance artists utilize and develop their social capital for exploiting work opportunities, which may indirectly facilitate upward social mobility. Interestingly, Bourdieu notes that social capital is intrinsically interwoven with symbolic capital or (mis)recognition (1986, 255). Menger (2001) and Abbing (2008) agree that the symbolic capital of artists refers to their public recognition or *good reputation* as professional and therefore genuine artists awarded by already consecrated peers, important critics, established curators and others who have the legitimate power to ascribe value.[9]

Developing social and symbolic capital, and as such attaining the recognition from consecrated producers of meaning and value of a work of art, demands personal branding. Most informants try to avoid discussing personal branding as much as possible, because they feel uncomfortable with the idea that the success of their products has more to do with strategic identity work rather than with the quality of their work. In the course of selling their (promised) work, artists have in any case to engage in a slow, ongoing, dynamic and interactive process of networking with programmers, co-producers, artistic directors and the like. Thus, in common meeting places such as theater foyers or cafés, social capital may be informally converted into economic and professional capital. This symbolic economy is quite specific to the art world and both Brussels and Berlin follow its logic. Hence, the social functioning of these dance scenes, demonstrated by the qualitative findings, confirms Elisabeth Currid's conclusion, empirically underpinned by research in the New York creative scene, that 'the social is an important production system for disseminating ideas, valorizing goods and services, and distributing jobs' (Currid 2007, 110-111). Within the field of contemporary dance, the scenes in Brussels and Berlin act as such a 'social production system' characterized by hypersocialization. An informant testifies:

[9] We would expand here on the multiple dynamic of symbol recognition, or the 'symbolic recompense' that transforms suffering (which in this context can be understood as juggling with multiple forms of precarity) into pleasure as suggested by Dejours in Deranty 2010, 185). Interesting in his account is the proposition that only the closest peers can provide the "most precious form of recognition, the one that is grounded in the real knowledge of what is involved in the task" (Deranty 2010, 186). The neoliberal model, based on individualization and competition (disguised under the fashionable terms of autonomy and self-realization) has caused a demise of such 'intersubjective recognition', which comes paired with an 'increased difficulty for individuals to transform the burden of work into a sublimating experience' (Deranty 2008, 459)

> So much of the work I do, and also the way that I come across the work that I do, is really driven by social relationship. Cultivating the opportunities and how to generate a full calendar: a lot of it comes from uncovering connections, affinities and relationships with people and their work.

Particularly the social dynamics at play with venue and residency programmers prove to be fundamental in advancing contemporary dance artists' careers. Programmers are the gatekeepers who control and provide artists' access to support, in terms of infrastructure and production budget. Needless to say that the informality of this type of social production system does not come without threats. The artist's autonomy becomes somewhat restricted because to ensure production the artist is not fully free to test, play and create whatever. Instead, artists might be tempted to please gatekeepers and let current trends and risk management inform their artistic intentions. In this respect, an informant deplores that as a freelance artist she has to become her own trademark with *a unique selling point*:

> The idea with freelance stuff that you become the brand and everybody's always like what's special? What do you offer? Or what's your novelty? […] This idea that you – you! – become the thing that you're selling. […] This self-branding becomes the work everyone's doing. I was thinking how fucking pressing that is if you want to be experimental. You have no market, or whatever, to be truly experimental.

The informant here makes a number of important observations, pointing to the prevalent fetish on the *who* instead of the *what*, which leaves little room to experiment in the performing arts field. In this economy, the artist has indeed to know much in advance before diving into a studio: what will they create in order to receive support for making and presenting their work? The answer may inform a demand for governmental project money but is any case needed in direct contact with gatekeepers. Yet, the artist thus sells a *promise* but cannot sell it unless having established the reputation of being a *promising artist*.

3.3. Brussels and Berlin: similar yet different

Due to the larger dance population combined with a more limited budget for art subsidies, acquiring project funding in Berlin seems to be much more competitive than in Brussels and even appears unattainable for many contemporary dance artists. We observe that many Berlin-based artists do not even apply for project funding because the odds are too low, whereas the majority of informants in Brussels regularly apply. The available means in Brussels prompt more artists to take their chances in the subsidized art circuit, which stimulates mutual competition. Furthermore, due to the relatively generous structural funding for art institutions such as workspaces, the Brussels-based dance artists seem to have more infrastructure at their disposal within a reasonable commute. Also, this indirect form of funding fosters competition because due to the relatively small size of the Brussels dance population everyone feels confident to place a bet. In addition, it should be kept in mind that also about half of our Brussels-based sample enjoys the social security advantages of the Belgian artist status, which also can be understood as a form of indirect funding. In other words, Brussels-based dance artists enjoy more support, both direct and indirect, which cultivates competition among them.

Because of these conditions, contemporary dance artists in Brussels tend to rely much more on gatekeepers because they work more often between institutions in the official subsidized art circuit. To do so, the artist needs to accumulate social and symbolic capital to get access to the funding, infrastructure and other means of support. Hence Brussels-based performing artists, who generally work on a project basis, effectively undertake more economic and therefore also artistic risk management. To enhance one's chances for support, an artist needs to stick to her brand and leave a degree of predictability in the work so that gatekeepers (such as the commission going over subsidies or venue programmers) in turn can measure their risks when they consider investing in someone's work. Therefore, the fact that various productions by the same artist regularly look alike may not only be due to a lack of time to experiment in the studio but may have to do with the fear of diverging too much from the brand they represent. In other words, the framing symbolic economy partly promotes artistic *sameness* because artists are afraid they will lose their audience or support. This is in fact the often-unnoticed counterpart of the logic of artistic distinction stressed by Bourdieu (1996). An artist has indeed to formulate a distinctive identity or brand, yet over time she becomes partly prisoned by it because gatekeepers and audience alike expect *more of the same* (be it of course with variations ensuring the particularity of every distinct work).

Our observations also explain why Berlin, more so than Brussels, is known as the creative hub for experimental art. Since contemporary dance artists work as self-employed freelancers in Berlin, the tendency to approach and please gatekeepers seems to be much lower. When working self-employed and deliberately avoiding any subsidy system, one can emancipate more from institutions and gatekeepers, which in turn allows more room for experiment. Stated differently, self-employed artists who chose to work outside any subsidy system experience much more autonomy within their creative work because they have a nothing-to-lose attitude.

All this brings us to a two-sided interim conclusion. On the one hand, from a dance and performance studies perspective risk management in the subsidized art circuit has caused artists, who rely on project funding, to stay in their comfort zones rehashing material and ideas. Indeed, project subsidies have an insidious quality: they tend to govern dance and in doing so, to some extent may impede artistic freedom and the artist's autonomy. On the other hand, seen from a labor studies perspective, contemporary dance within the subsidized art circuit is more professionalized and less marked by socio-economic precarity: at least much of the creative work happens under contract, is paid for and results in a completed product in the shape of an evening-length production for the black box. However, while the working conditions of the Berlin-based contemporary dance artists are more precarious, especially in terms of average income, income security and pension, they do not at all seem less satisfied in their profession. This can be explained by the immaterial currency of autonomy when working self-employed and often outside any subsidy system, which seems to compensate for the lack of security. However, our Berlin respondents seem also confronted with a work pressure that is even more deeply interwoven with life than our Brussels-based sample. Thus, with respect to the bohemian work ethic the question remains how much more autonomy one achieves by emancipating from funding systems and art institutions. Do we not yet again stumble upon the paradox that more autonomy in fact entails more work?

3.4. Employability, potentiality, insufficiency

Working within a social production system necessitates two kinds of identity work. The first one we already discussed and comes down to the building up and maintenance through self-branding and networking of a distinct identity towards the other (drawing on Bourdieu 1983, read: the various gatekeepers who ascribe value and have the supposed legitimate power to do so). The second mode of identity work is self-directed and points to a broader dynamic, i.e. the connection between *employability* and *potentiality*. In relation to the notion of employability, one's potentiality as a principle represents 'the human subject as capable of becoming always *more* than what one is' and 'work as a process of freeing up, liberating and mobilizing the subject's inner qualities always ready to be actualized' (Costea et al. 2012, 31). The authors underline that the danger lies in the fact that work is seen as the place for the actualization of ones potentialities: if every individual ought to see themselves as always capable of more, then one is predetermined to engage in 'a tragic self-seeking journey always bound up with a looming prospect of failure to meet such expectations' (Costea et al. 2012, 35).

In his incisive analysis of neoliberal *psychopolitics* and the contemporary crisis of freedom Byung-Chul Han (2017) also underlines the oppressive effects of a work regime centered on the realization of an individual's potentiality instead of the evaluation of well-defined tasks. His comments actualize those of Richard Sennett in 'the culture of the new capitalism' (2006). More than once, their theoretically informed observations mirror the self-observations of our respondents. An informant puts it as follows:

> When you don't have boundaries for work, that's what makes you always feel, like the pressure inside of you, that you should or could be working. When you should or could start or finish is just a matter of how ambitious you are, how motivated you are or how competitive you are.

Exactly this logic feeds a constant *feeling of insufficiency*. As another informant testifies: 'I'm doing my best, but it's not enough somehow.' Especially the need *to feel productive* recurs throughout our fieldwork and seems to be a coping tool to self-justify the validity of one's work. The pressure among our informants to optimize their productivity and potential is even that high that the accompanying feeling of insufficiency eventually may lead to burnout and depression. Five out of all fourteen informants have addressed the topic of burnout spontaneously and expressed explicitly that they have either suffered burnouts in the past or that they were on the verge of one during the period of our fieldwork. Nonetheless, some informants noted that it was still difficult for them to actually acknowledge their mental health situation as such, because—as an informant puts it—'you only technically have a burnout when you go to a doctor and they can prescribe you not to go to work, but it's not relevant unless you have a full-time job.'

The feeling of insufficiency in the bohemian work ethic also ties in with the lack of career progress and prospects. An informant's testimony reveals that self-precarization for the sake of self-realization is definitely not always compensated by symbolic recognition:

> Ten or fifteen years of awards of funding, of professional reviews, of engaging within a community of artists, and I wouldn't qualify to study for an artistic PhD?

It is only to be expected that regarding the bohemian work ethic a certain evolution comes with age. Only after some years spent in the precarious labor market of the art world, one starts to notice the negative sides such as the difficulty to save money and to upkeep a steady relationship (compare Brook et al. 2020). Regarding the latter topic, we should note that the social homogamy revealed among our sample refutes the argument that artists may live off their partner's wages. Socio-economic precarity often affects both partners, who sometimes also raise children together. In many cases, they have to juggle their schedules, which most informants with children claim is doable up until the point where the child reaches the age of compulsory attendance at school. Most couples thus seem to be able to cope with the organizational burden of precarious work because both partners work in the same field and can thus relate. In other words, since both parents are part of the closest peers who understand the 'real of the work', they can manage. Within the project-based field of contemporary dance, the 'real of the work' – to use Dejours's wording to describe the gap between the prescribed task and the actual activity (Deranty 2010, 184) – entails all the artistic and para-artistic activities, including both the creative-productive side (the conception, creation and presentation of a dance performance or dance workshop) and the administrative-organizational side (all the entrepreneurial tasks that come with it) of these activities.

If the negative sides of the bohemian work ethic, which may accumulate over time, are not compensated by immaterial currencies and (symbolic) recognition, the bad simply does not outweigh the good anymore. In this respect, we must point out that we have only examined what happens within the contemporary dance scenes of Brussels and Berlin by studying those artists who have remained loyal to their profession. The fieldwork attests to a willingness to remain loyal yet with an openness to deal with the situation and to voice concerns. However, we have not queried those who chose to exit. As a result of chronic overburdening within the bohemian work ethic, some may come to the one question indicative of burnout: 'can I still and do I still want to keep doing this?'

These questions indeed remain unanswered: how many contemporary dance artists endure the just sketched conditions and how long do they remain loyal? We can only speculate that when the quality of their (working) lives declines and the exchange rate between material and immaterial currencies becomes weaker, there might be an exit. Looking at our study, we can suspect this happens indeed: merely a few survey respondents are over fifty and the oldest fieldwork informant was 48 at the start of the study. Nonetheless, we predict autonomously working performing artists generally remain loyal as long as the values that drive them and the directly related benefits compensate, however minimal, for the plural forms of precarity.

Conclusion

Our research shows that despite the relatively different macro structures informing the functioning of the Brussels and Berlin scenes of contemporary dance, a very similar symbolic

economy with a social production system dominates both. This economy at once induces and reproduces a bohemian work ethic among its players. The underlying logic according to which the queried agents operate in the art world implies that the bohemian values of autonomy, artistic pleasure, lifelong learning, self-development and self-realization compensate for the multifaceted precarious working conditions and insecure future prospects. The notion of a bohemian work ethic is indeed paradoxical. Traditionally, and this up until the counter-cultures of the 1950s and the 1960s, the bohemian ethos was associated with an outspoken anti-work attitude (see Halasz 2015). However, in neoliberal times this seems to have changed. Indeed, in the studied dance communities, an often-uneasy combination of a quest for autonomy and the necessity to make a living dominates. Especially the outlook of self-realization through artistic work makes the studied performing artists very willing to exploit themselves yet also very susceptible to burnout. Self-precarization will continue to happen as long as the immaterial income (the intrinsic and subjective job rewards such as symbolic recognition and the possibilities for realizing one's potentials) counterbalances the material income, or put differently, as long as the *work* remains rewarded with the *bohemian*. However, as soon as the autonomy to realize one's potentials is unmasked as a self-entrapping autonomy the feeling of insufficiency comes to wear the artist out.

In the uncovered symbolic economy, there is not much space for true artistic risk-taking, which implies that the autonomous artist is not so free to experiment with something that deviates excessively from the promise or brand they represent. Diverging too much from the expected entails an increase in economic risk potentially losing support and audience. The autonomous and project-based artist in the studied art worlds is in fact not so independent: their professional career depends on the recognition, or symbolic capital, they acquire from a number of cultural institutions with their gatekeepers, which can be converted to economic capital if they uphold their artistic promise. Ultimately, within the longstanding sociological agency-structure debate, we are in fact dealing with an autonomous heteronomy within the studied art worlds.

Our results for that matter seem to have a broader relevance beyond the studied artistic profession as they can account for almost any cultural profession, in the broad sense, so including for example our own academic field. As such, a bohemian work ethic also seems to apply outside of the art world but ties in with Ulrich Beck's *Brave New World of Work* (2000). However, as also Costea et al. note, this comes with the ethical danger that the 'moral urgency is to be heeded by individuals without allowing the limits of this exhortation to appear' (2012, 32) because there is supposedly no end to self-realization and therefore no complete self-fulfillment. More generally, expressive individualism has become vastly encapsulated within the neoliberal regime of flexible creative accumulation. Or as Laermans (2015, 331) concludes on the basis of his research into the Brussels field of contemporary dance: 'to be personally creative = to further or transform a personal potentiality, functioning as an individual artistic capital, in a hypercompetitive market = to be continually self-productive (…), regardless of economic rewards (…) = a statistically significant chance to lead the life of an underpaid flexible worker, continuously networking in view of more conducive opportunities to be creative.'

With the noteworthy exception of the theoretical work of Boltanski & Chiapello (2005), the entanglement of the outlined bohemian work ethic and a specific symbolic economy is regularly overlooked in the literature on neoliberalism in which (performing) artists are often dubbed the paradigmatic example of the ideal worker. Backed by our findings, we contend that the contemporary entrepreneurial culture is not entirely and exclusively defined by individualization, but also characterized by a significant sociality generating relationships through which networks are constituted, maintained, and expanded. Managing economic risk by upholding this social network, however, is at the cost of true artistic risk-taking or true autonomy. Therefore, it remains to be evaluated how economic security will encourage artistic risk-taking and positively affect the quality of artistic work if the symbolic economy in which performing artists abide by a bohemian work ethic stays put.

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