

## The 'West' versus 'the Rest'? Festival Curators as Gatekeepers for Sociocultural Diversity

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## **Beyond Diversity: A Critical View from and on the Sociology of Culture**

Lisa Gaupp

### **Introduction**

This chapter analyses how socio-cultural diversity is standardised through conventions in the performing arts. It examines how socio-cultural diversity is curated at renowned international performing arts festivals. As used here, socio-cultural diversity refers chiefly to artists and audiences with different socio-cultural backgrounds and to different art forms and aesthetic expressions. These festivals present a variety of performances, with art forms ranging from contemporary theatre, dance, music, to visual arts and many others. Generally, such festivals take place annually or bi-annually and are funded mainly by public or other third-party funding bodies. These are international festivals featuring artists from all over the world. In this contribution the focus is on so-called 'non-European' or non-'Western' performances and on the figure of the festival curator, understood as cultural broker, cultural intermediary as well as cultural gatekeeper. This chapter considers whether or not curators of festivals taking place in Europe or the 'West' define and normalise what is considered to be diversity and how it is programmed in the arts. In the tradition of Eurocentric and postcolonial critique, the issues of who, and on which grounds, holds the power to define conventions in the art world of the performing arts are discussed. The case studies presented serve as a basis to ask how, in general, international performing arts festivals are curated or managed and which socio-cultural conventions are applied, and through that application, which conventions are reinforced.

In international art worlds, "diversity is almost considered to be a value in and of itself" (Peres da Silva & Hondros, 2019). At the international performing arts festivals analysed in this case study, attempts to achieve diversity are based on diversifying

the audience as well as achieving a “greater visibility of work by artists with a ‘non-Western’ background” (Westen, 2012, p. 78). Different worldviews and challenging perspectives are welcomed or even the explicit goal of festival organisers. Diversity is most often understood as diversity in the national or ethnic origins of the performing artists. Diversity can also be about addressing and involving audiences with, in an intersectional perspective, different social identity markers such as gender, ethnicity, race, or sexual orientation. Some festivals also strive for greater linguistic diversity by translating performances and marketing material. Still others want to diversify by introducing art forms into their programmes that are new to the region (Gaupp, 2019). However, it will be shown that the conventions defining the boundaries of socio-cultural diversity at these festivals are mostly oriented toward the norm that art should be different, but not too different.

Most festivals communicate that the national origin of their artists is unimportant, that their mission is to present the ‘best’ artists, and art, regardless of national origin or any other affinity to a geographical location. But this image, essentially a marketing device, will be questioned by discussing how specific social processes and organisational structures seem to nevertheless lead to a ‘Western-centric’ canon at these performing arts festivals.

In its analysis of the organisational structures and processes of these festivals, this chapter queries two issues. First, whether the public presentation of these festivals is aligned with the practices acted out at these festivals or secondly, whether there are segregational tendencies dividing European or ‘Western’-based festivals, curators, artists and art forms from ‘the rest’, understood as an epistemological object constructed in opposition to an imaginary ‘West’ (Said, 1991). Through analysing the institutionalising practices of the socio-cultural conventions that influence how diversity is displayed, the chapter explores what role festival curators play when it comes to normalising diversity and how other gatekeeping processes determine which groups will be produced at the festivals.

It seems that, on the one hand, there is a strongly Eurocentric or ‘Western’-centric canon with regard to what kind of aesthetic forms are being curated. On the other, and on the level of formal organisation, there seems to exist both normative ideological definitions of diversity as well as conventions of diversity based on the global circulation of financial capital. It will be shown whether these assumptions of

how diversity is curated prove to be true and which organisational processes form the basis of these developments.

The gatekeeping and other power relations involved in the setting up of festival programmes will be analysed. How diversity is defined in the curatorial practice at performing arts festivals is deeply dependent upon the cultural and social capital, tastes, dispositions, beliefs and perceptions of individual curators, who are understood as cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984). But it is not the curators alone who define diversity but rather the complex processes and structures surrounding curatorial practices. As such, in this chapter, both the curator and the curatorial strategies of the festivals are analysed.

It is not possible to determine whether a festival is curated in a Eurocentric perspective or is situated in imaginary spaces seemingly outside Europe. What can be determined is that art worlds construct diverse spaces of globalisation, transcultural spaces in-between, and that they are themselves in a constantly changing mode. The perspective of 'Europe or the West versus the rest' falls short. Speaking with Derrida, "every seemingly strong and irreducible opposition is declared a 'theoretical fiction'" (2004, p. 135).

So it is not enough to criticise neo-colonial power hierarchies in the art world of performing arts festivals. We must also look at how socio-cultural norms, or conventions, come into being and especially how they can be changed. The 'West' and the 'rest' should not be put into a static dichotomy. Neither should diversity be understood as a mere plurality of differences, as if there were no conflict involved in the cross-cultural contacts taking place at these festivals. In this sense it will be argued that while it is still necessary to lay open and question the continuing biases underlying curating processes at international performing arts festivals, it is also important to demonstrate that diversity is not something that is definable. It can lead to processes of transcultural diversity that allow for the development of dynamic spaces-in-between in which critique and conflicts are major driving forces.

The conclusion is that arts management in general and curatorial practices in particular must respond to the realities of today's post-migrant social processes. Likewise, it will be important to examine how a transcultural perspective provides an alternative view of curatorial practices. This view entails the rejection of Eurocentric or 'Western'-centric assumptions and a focus on decentred postcolonial analysis,

instead of the conventional model of core, semi-periphery and periphery countries (Wallerstein 1990).

### **Curatorial practice at international performing arts festivals**

Curators embody a special role in the arts. And the same is true for the curators' organisational field of performing arts festivals in the context of international art production. Curators are important gatekeepers for upcoming artists if they are to be produced on an international level. The festivals they curate form an art world in Howard Becker's sense (2008 [1982]). Festivals, as one of the most common organisational structures in the art world of performing arts, can thus be seen as a social practice, as 'a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings' (Schatzki, 1996, p. 89). Through the analysis of the social practices at festivals one can find out a lot about how people interact, communicate, socialise etc. when participating in performances. Thus, festivals have become a key influence on artistic cultural life.

This chapter focuses on performing arts festivals with cultural, national and artistic diversity as part of their mission statement. This means that these festivals present themselves as featuring artists from around the world with diverse cultural backgrounds and programmes devoted to multiple art forms and the crossing of art genre boundaries. Performing arts at these festivals do not only encompass productions in music, drama, and dance, but also include contemporary performances such as site-specific shows, installations with performances, and discursive programmes such as panel discussions on the topics of the respective festival. Similar to approaches in contemporary music, performing arts question what theatre, dance or music should be and tend to develop new approaches to art production. With this approach to questioning enduring concepts of more 'traditional' art forms, performing arts are very much a suitable research field for analysing how different approaches to diversity in the arts are enacted.

The curator's role is clearly one of the most urgent ones to be discussed when analysing the field. The professional field of the curator has become one of the most desired jobs in these globalised times as, since about the 1970s, the boundaries between curator and artist have become blurred. "The bearer of an artistic 'skills set' replaces the exclusive figure of the original artist" (Reckwitz, 2012, p. 115). Curators therefore carry symbolic capital in the art field as embodying the 'entrepreneurial

self'. Curators no longer focus solely on visual arts, but mix genres and work outside the art field or rather aestheticise every part of social life in the paradigm of the 'creativity dispositif' (Reckwitz, 2012).

Rather than examining the curating of a festival, "the technical modality of making art go public" (Lind, 2012, p. 11), 'the curatorial' is studied as a complex "field of overlapping and intertwining activities, tasks, and roles that formerly were divided and more clearly attributed to different professions, institutions, and disciplines" (von Bismarck et al., 2012, p. 8). Curatorial strategies are seen as a social practice that construct and deconstruct identities, symbols and relations in the performing arts. In other words, the curatorial is understood as a complex field in arts management of different intermingling practices, multiplex network relations, persons and institutions where dominant ideologies, terminologies, habits etc. are produced and reproduced, but where the curator also embodies a special role when it comes to defining (social) conventions in the respective field. Related to Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of a field, the curatorial has "social and political implications" (von Bismarck, 2012, p. 37) where curators and other field participants define and redefine the rules and by doing so "create differences, deviances, and frictions with the existing conditions" (von Bismarck, 2012, p. 37). Bourdieu's cultural intermediaries are also embedded in a complex field of organisations that influence ideas of taste channelled by the cultural intermediary.

At the same time, the organisational structures of the festivals enable and limit curatorial strategies. By studying the curatorial strategies employed in these festivals, one is able to detect certain meanings of diversity construction, and analyse the gatekeeping processes and power relations that form the base of every curatorial decision. What is revealed is how the conventions of fostering diversity at performing arts festivals are influenced by the complex field of the curatorial. In the following, the figure of the curator and the concept of the curatorial are both understood as meaning that every curator is influenced by the complex conditions surrounding their work and the curatorial is intermeshed with power relations.

We will now explore the power of conventions in order to demonstrate the complexity of relations in the curatorial and the art world of international performing art festivals. The more important festivals are for the cultural landscape, the more significant the figure of the curator is. These curators, seen internationally, act as both gatekeepers and brokers. Curators are also described as cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984),

as taste makers who define what is legitimate and illegitimate art. So cultural intermediaries, drawing from their personal habitus, which includes cultural capital and subjective dispositions, can assign cultural legitimacy to an art form or an artist but they can equally exclude art forms or artists by constructing them as illegitimate (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural intermediaries also work as ‘power brokers’ between, or rather bridging, the spheres of production and consumption, thus filtering information and products from the area of artists to the area of their audiences (Featherstone, 2007).

Brokerage involves how the relations between the single actors are constructed on a qualitative level and can take place on many different levels. “A social network is a network of meanings” (White, 1992, p. 65f), and these meanings are stabilised by conventions. As Becker puts it:

Every art world uses, to organise some of the cooperation between some of its participants, conventions known to all or almost all well-socialized members of the society in which it exists. (Becker, 2008 [1982], p. 42)

As such, politics and domination are at the centre of these practices. The establishment of standards and norms of deviancy can lead to an intrinsic artistic censorship. In order to be able to participate in the art worlds of performing arts, artists must adapt to established conventions. This is not to say that different productions are explicitly forbidden, only that their artists would be less likely to succeed in having their work produced. Following Pierre Bourdieu, acquiring a certain habitus is essential to joining the respective field (1984). This means that to gain acceptance or higher status in the field, artists unconsciously conform to a certain behaviour – including lifestyle, clothing, speech, and taste – to display the social status of the artist.

## **Methodology**

This chapter deals with how conventions in the curation of performing arts festivals develop, and it examines the interdependencies among diversity, the performing arts, and the curatorial. This is done by combining performance, cultural, organisational and postcolonial studies with sociological theories and methodological approaches. The arguments are based on an empirical qualitative study in the field of international performing arts festivals conducted from 2014 until 2018. On the whole, 26

qualitative expert interviews were conducted with 22 curators and dramaturges of 13 festivals based mainly in Europe, West Asia and North Africa. In addition, four artists and representatives of five more cultural organisations active in the field of music and performing arts were interviewed. These data are backed by the analysis of seven public discussions, lectures and published interviews of curators from these festivals as well as press publications of the festivals. The notions of diversity discussed earlier are then used as a grid for analysis of this data corpus. Most of these festivals and events were attended for one or several days of participant observation. In one festival the author participated in a production as a singer in the choir. In this chapter, two of these festivals are used as exemplary cases to highlight the findings discussed below.

### **Network relations**

While it may seem that festivals taking place in Europe are dominated by artists from European countries and that this representation of how diversity should be staged has become the norm, it cannot be stated that it is always and only 'European or Western festivals versus the rest'. There are far more complex network processes at work, which are again influenced by multiple power structures and broker positions as well as funding structures, language and cultural policies, and festivals mission statements. But these processes also generate synergetic effects and opportunities for upcoming artists and smaller festivals, as will be shown in this section.

One of the main structural influences on these organisations is the number of in-house productions and co-productions in comparison to presentations of guest performances. In essence these approaches differ. While in-house productions and co-productions typically involve a specific show being developed in cooperation with a specific curator, guest performances generally consist of existing works with no intended link to the specific festival. Most curators who took part in this study indicated a preference for co-producing over presenting guest performances.

Very often such in-house productions are too expensive to be produced by a single festival organization. This is one of the most important reasons for the development of festival networks, which co-produce one or several works in order to share production costs by showing the same production at the cooperating festivals. One result of this strategy is that there are fewer performing arts groups and fewer productions in the festival calendar. On the other hand, this can lead to festivals



losing their individuality and their unique selling position. A canonized performance landscape takes shape, with the same groups being produced at a majority of these festivals and a corresponding loss in diversity of cultural expression.

But the majority of this study's interview partners acknowledge the positive aspects of such cooperation. From 2007 until 2017 eight European festivals of performing arts united in the network *Nxt.Stp* and received funding from the European Commission totalling of 2.5 million euros.<sup>1</sup> This development gives upcoming artists the opportunity to be produced on a European level without having to conduct lengthy production negotiations. The substantial funding from the EU, in addition to their existing festival budgets, means that a large part of the performing arts world in Europe is joined in an institutionalised network.

The funding scheme reveals a deeply Eurocentric bias. Not only had the non-European festival representatives to pay for their own travels to network meetings, they also had no influence in deciding which artists were produced. Such a network seems to be a closed circle, inevitably facilitating a European canon of performing arts. But this is relativised because *Nxt.stp* is not the only the network in which these festivals participate. It is more accurate to say that curators come together in a number of non-institutionalised networking groups, joining one for a period time because a specific theme is attractive and then in the following season finding other partners. So, new network contexts are continually established, which in turn strengthens the position of the respective curator as a broker. This approach was widely recognised by other curators in this study. As such, there are several strategies in the curatorial that not only depend on funding schemes and financing issues but also on several other influences, such as following a specific theme. In addition, the ambition or mission of a curatorial also contributes to how much and what notions of diversity are being practiced at these festivals.

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<sup>1</sup> This network encompasses many of the major festivals in Europe: *kunstenfestivaldesarts* (Brussels, Belgium), *Alcantara Festival* (Lisbon, Portugal), *Baltoscandal festival* (Rakvere, Estonia), *Göteborgs Dans & Teater Festival* (Goteborg, Denmark), *De Internationale Keuze van de Rotterdamse Schouwburg* (Rotterdam, Netherlands), *steirischer herbst* (Graz, Austria), *Théâtre national de Bordeaux en Aquitaine* (Bordeaux, France) and, in the second funding period, *Noorderzon Performing Arts Festival* (Groningen, Netherlands). Associated festivals that did not receive EU funding but participated in the network meetings were *Dense Bamako Danse* (Bamako, Mali), *On Marche* (Marrakesh, Morocco), *Kyoto Experiment* (Kyoto, Japan) and the *Panorama Festival* (Rio de Janeiro, Brasil) (<https://www.nxtstp.eu/>).

So, even though these institutionalised networks are open to new members and sometimes provide valuable opportunities for unknown artists to be produced on a wider international scale, there is nevertheless a national focus in this process. Former director of the festival *Steirischer Herbst* and Viennese city councilor for culture Veronika Kaup-Hasler expresses this aptly:

The biggest challenge for the arts is an increasing nationalism in all matters. Due to the financial crisis, the national funding bodies insist more and more on national production – foreign participation is of course welcome in financial terms, but there is less interest in co-financing new works by non-resident artists. (Kaup-Hasler, 2012, p. 5)

So again, as can be seen in some of the examples, brokerage and gatekeeping depends heavily on who is funding the festival. One might assume the bigger the budget of a festival, the greater the diversity of the artists in its programme. However, this view falls short as the funders' mission and funding schemes also have to be taken into account.

### **Socio-cultural conventions**

A review of the programmes of what the majority of the interviewed curators consider as most important performing arts festivals over the last ten years indicates that a western canon of artists is emerging. Despite a growing focus on artists from Latin America, especially Argentina, such as *Mariano Pensotti*, programmed artists and art groups featured are mainly from 'Western' countries or at least based in the 'West'.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the structural reasons outlined above, 'aesthetic barriers' are a cause behind this development. 'Aesthetic barriers' hinder non-European works from being presented at major festivals. In fact, there is "strong Eurocentrism in the field" (Huseman, 2012, p. 276f) and this takes place even amongst curators of Europe-based festivals who are from non-European countries. Huseman (2012, p. 276f) explains,

Works from other continents get easily labelled as either 'outdated' in comparison to work based in Europe or as 'too specific' to be

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<sup>2</sup> These include *Forced Entertainment* (UK), *SheShePop* (Germany), *Rimini Protokoll* (Germany), *Jan Lauwers & the Needcompany* (Belgium), *Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker* (Belgium), *the Wooster Group* (USA), *Nature Theater of Oklahoma* (USA), *Boris Charmatz* (France) and *Milo Rau* (Switzerland).

presented next to European works without also creating access to their 'original' local context. ... Even European curators who decide to focus on works from non-European regions often have to defend their programme from accusations of being 'an easy way out' or pure 'exoticism'.

Such generalisations have to be critically examined. First of all, a statement that equates the country of origin of an artist or curator with their artistic practice equally exoticizes ethnicity and race. It is equally arguable as to whether or not there is such a thing as 'non-European art'. An artist could practice an art form, wherever its traditions might be rooted in the world, once this artist has acquired a certain level of capital in the respective field of art. In addition, art itself is not static but instead it is constantly changing not least traveling; every art form is a dynamic transcultural practice with no pure topographic origin (Gaupp, 2016). Nevertheless, the processes of assigning a certain meaning in the production, distribution and consumption are subject to the established socio-cultural conventions. This is why equating an art form with a country of origin is wide spread. Johannes Ismaiel-Wendt calls these othering processes in music practices 'topophilia' (Ismaiel-Wendt, 2011). Still, even when a curator does not engage in such practices, aesthetic barriers may still come into play when the art form does not comply with the established standards and norms of the (European) art world.

Socio-cultural conventions serve as an interpretative framework that ultimately decide what is appropriate to programme and what is not. The actions of a curator, understood as a cultural intermediary in Bourdieu's sense, reveal how conventions are not simply routinised procedures but rather formed and legitimised by taste. After all, a cultural intermediary is often striving to legitimate the 'not-yet-legitimate' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 326). The curator's work as a taste maker reconfirms his own cultural capital and thus his position as cultural intermediary. He reproduces and legitimizes social stratification through notions of taste (Bourdieu 1984).

The conventions that define how diversity is staged and perceived within the field of international performing arts festivals are strongly oriented toward a norm that attempts to stress that national origin is irrelevant and a festival should be a space of inclusion with the greatest possible diversity of art forms and artists. Yet, when it comes to valuing differences, curators tend to only include productions that are

different enough to fulfil the demand for the unfamiliar while not too different from the known.

Another issue that needs to be addressed in this context is the dictat in contemporary art worlds to produce something innovative or creative (Reckwitz, 2012). In the art world of contemporary performing arts, innovations can be introduced if they are supported by the organizational system of the curatorial and if they still work with the known conventions, even while bending or breaking them, “as long as the change in perception does not lead to radical practice” (Büscher-Ulbrich et al., 2013, p. 11). If an innovation does not refer to any standards within this art world – no matter if this reference involves conforming to or breaking the rules – it is highly unlikely to be included into a festival programme. Perhaps even more urgent is the question of what happens to critical or subversive art forms when they become an ‘innovation’ in the art world they were once opposed to (Chiapello & Boltanski, 2007).

Only a person with a strong broker position is able to introduce something more or less unknown or critical into this art world. This means that it takes the social relations of a gatekeeper to introduce a cultural innovation, in the sense of an unknown aesthetic convention, into an art world. But if there is no social relationship, the cultural innovation is unlikely to be established. So if an ‘African’ artist practices an art form outside of the art world of international performing arts festivals in Europe, this practice will not change the conventions and aesthetic expectations in this art world. Only if this art form is being brokered by a cultural intermediary is it possible for it to be accepted for programming. Again, as intermediaries curators are able to change the conventions and norms of the art world. So if there is to be innovation in ‘Western’-centric art worlds, it is exactly these curators who need to be even more self-reflective about the underlying biases that inform every process in the curatorial in order to reverse “the relation between norm and deviance” (von Osten, 2003, p. 7). One might think that the opportunity to promote one’s own work through online channels would make it easier for artists from outside an art world to enter, but the position of curators as cultural intermediaries remains largely unaffected by digitalisation for three reasons. Firstly, curators simply do not look for new artists online nor do they necessarily have time to watch all the videos sent to them by unknown artists. Instead, they depend on their own experiences or personal relationships with other curators or trusted experts in the field. Normally, a curator only becomes aware of an artist if they have already been recommended by a trusted

broker (curator interview, 2015-05-26). Secondly, even in the face of the decentralizing potential of digitalization, topographic space remains important, as cultural intermediaries and other helping hands are still regionally clustered (Hracs, 2013). Thirdly, an artist's symbolic capital depends on their personal relationships to cultural intermediaries in the field, providing them access to festival networks and programmes (Lizé, 2016).

Following in the conclusion, the possibilities of a transcultural curatorial practice will be considered.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed how different concepts of diversity are played out in the curatorial practice of performing arts festivals. As postcolonial critique, it was argued that this practice is deeply influenced by power relations, conventions, network structures and network processes as well as other organisational issues. These power hierarchies are unlikely to change in the near future as the majority of performing arts festivals are financed by 'Western'-centric funding bodies and organised by established curators able to strongly influence the conventions governing this art world. This makes it all the more imperative for research into how cross-cultural cooperation can be made fruitful for all parties involved, whether artist, festival organiser, audience and curator. In a transcultural perspective, it will be crucial to lay open, critique and question the structures, conventions and processes in the curatorial of the art world of performing arts festivals in order to decolonise international arts production a bit more and achieve something resembling a true diversity.

The research presented here indicates that the curatorial needs to adapt to the realities of today's post-migrant social processes (Gaupp, 2016). Diversity understood from a transcultural perspective means that differences are not reduced to national or ethnic differences, but are seen for what they are, a manifold and multi-layered intersectionality in each individual. These differences are not categorically ascribed to artists or art forms. It is indeed possible to change or at least expand the prevailing convention of 'different enough-but not too different' in the curatorial of performing arts festivals through conflict and critique, questioning the established concepts of diversity and imagining alternative point of views and alternative

exchanges. The curatorial is not a fixed dichotomy of Eurocentric or 'Western'-centric curators working 'against' non-European or non-'Western' artists and art forms, it is not Europe or the 'West' versus 'the rest' but rather a transcultural way of inclusion that involves critique as a major driving force. Such a transcultural curatorial practice would legitimise conflict as part of engaging with 'new' art forms. So the feared unfamiliarity of an art form or even the unconscious biased conventions within curatorial practice could themselves become topics of exploration in festival programmes, creating new meeting places for the performing arts. Transcultural diversity in this sense does not mean that social inequalities or discrimination processes are ignored, but rather that they are at the core of a transcultural diversity-sensitive approach. In this context, diversity is not a given entity but rather a condition for life in today's societies, "a matter of cultural overlaps, border spaces and spaces-in-between, of crossings and simultaneous affiliations" (Yıldız, 2013, p. 144).

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