



CRreating Other Ways of Dissemination

Résumé of the CROWD Conference
for literary activists.
Berlin, 23rd and 24th January 2015

Let's CROWD across Europe! Kick-starting a grassroots network for literary activists.

The European independent literary scene's self-starting network CROWD – CReating Other Ways of Dissemination – has now officially been launched with a two-day-conference. Inspired, dedicated literary activists from the UK, Serbia, Italy, Germany, Latvia, Cyprus, Finland, Austria, the Czech Republic and Iceland have been invited to discuss their many diverse ideas about literature: how they host readings and create literature in their own countries. The conference took place in Berlin on 23rd and 24th January 2015. It was hosted by the Lettrétage e. V., one of the four founding partners of the project (Lettrétage in Berlin, FORUM STADTPARK in Austria, Nuoren Voiman Liitto in Finland, IDEOGRAMMA in Cyprus).



The conference served as a forum to question and compare both financial conditions and culture politics, with the aim of defining and developing a framework for literary events in which the artistic production of grassroots activism can take place. The participants were able to gain a thorough insight into international circumstances in the independent literary scene, which raised many vital questions of an aesthetic and practical nature such as: what is the independent scene exactly? Is making art a privilege? How should artists approach institutions in order to get funding? And how could a wider audience be reached and actively engaged?

From the outset, particular emphasis was placed on both financial and institutional issues faced in the independent (and emerging) literary scene across Europe. Keynote speaker, Moritz Malsch (Léttretage), provided a meaningful overview of financial perspectives for literary activists (pension, insurance and funding) in line with the German



Photo: © Ulrike Techert

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If you want to be rich, choose another job. If you love books, read them. If you thrive on intelligent company, become a literary activist!

CULTURE IS WORK!

Do I need to starve in order to create good art?

What stood out in particular in contrasting the various situations across Europe, was that there are in fact many funding opportunities in Germany. However, they are frequently involve hurdling huge bureaucratic minefields in order to complete the application process for financial support. Martin Jankowski, for example, applied for working permission for a cultural prison project at 16 ministries of justice in the federal republic. His application, and ultimately his funding, depended on the decisions and consents of many different people. This meant inordinate amounts of work had to be done in advance, without being able to guarantee a successful outcome i.e. approved funding.

The FORUM Stadtpark team from Graz explained that in Austria the independent scene is accepted, even recognized, but that it constantly faces obstacles at a political level related to a lack of understanding.

After carrying out his own research, Czechborn Ondrej Buddeus claims that “literary activism” in the form of “literary mediation” can become a political issue, even influencing freedom of speech. This is especially true in a situation where funding for public culture in the Czech Republic has been affected by a massive financial cuts.

And similarly in Serbia, the ministry of culture simply does not have the funds, as Ana Pejovic reported. There is a pension fund and minimum wage for members of the Serbian organisation “ART society” and being a writer has now finally been recognised as a profession. This has been a long process and taken ten years to get this far.

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Creative work means the freedom to create experiments – trying out, investigating, developing, but above all, doing the things that excite and drive us according to our values.

On a different note, Romania has to deal with corruption and blackmailing. There is no secure funding because changes to the political situation require concrete changes to the entire governmental organisation. One example, which was provided by the Romanian events organiser, Corina Bernic, was a literary festival that had to be dropped after four editions because there was no governmental support at all. So particularly in Eastern Europe, there are distinct politically related problems with funding.

In Iceland, however, the independent scene cannot rely on secure funding either. The only possible way to obtain secure funding is to cooperate with mainstream politics. Funding will only be secured through hosting events, as Valgerdur Thoroddsdottir explained. It is impossible to make a living there as a writer, never mind as a poet.

Andrea Inglese reported that in Italy cultural affairs are not really considered to be of sufficient importance by ruling powers. As a cultural activist you are often told “you cannot fill your sandwich with art”. Yet, in spite of the prevailing conservative idea of poetry, a new experimental, lively and committed poetry scene has blossomed over the past ten years. Today, it is one of the most animated scenes of the literary world. Even without funding, literary activists organise meetings and readings, and are actively engaged in literary blogs and magazines.



Photos: Valgerður Þoroddsdóttir (above), Andrea Inglese (below) (©gezzett.de)



Photo: Max Höfler, Lily Michaelidou, Ondrej Buddeus, Laura Serkosalo (©gezett.de)



I work to become poor in old age.

The discussion identified that most major sponsors have either no insight into and/or no access to the independent scene. All too often, they are not even aware of the presence of an active independent scene. So how can this situation be rectified?

By analysing the political landscape in terms of specific lobby groups for literary activism, it was agreed that there is a significant lack of politically influential groups in Europe and that currently, there is an urgent need to create understanding of the independent scene – for its own survival's sake. Participants unanimously agreed that CROWD, as a network, would help raise awareness, connecting the scenes, facilitat-

ing contact with partners and offering assistance in gaining funding. The issue of “space” has also been addressed: the commission for culture should be striving to create geographical, intellectual and digital space for art.

Participants of this initial discussion round agreed that cultural, creative engagement must be considered as work. There is no doubt: The independent scene creates a significant part of a cultural city's attraction. It generates reputation, dynamic and economic value. As cultural representatives of their regions, literary activists must be appropriately rewarded for their dedicated work.

Literature as mother tongue: „In search of a common language.“ Communication on an international and intersectoral level.

Photo: Tom Bresemann (@gezett.de)



Another very important theme that was extensively discussed during the conference was how to create a common language universally employed by literary activists, as well as the general public and potential sponsors alike. Finding a mutual tongue, valid for both economy and curating, is necessary for clarifying the significance of art to society. The following three condensed points were discussed during the conference.

- How to bridge art and politics? It is up to us to find out how we can expand our borders and discover what is possible, and eventually hold talks and open negotiations with politicians.
- How does language change and how is it used in organising events related to art? Bearing all this in mind, we came to the conclusion that the language used during the conference could affectionately be termed as “bad European English” (Globalish).
- Finally, what kinds of solutions are available when language becomes a problem for the audience with international guests and the inclusion of multilingual texts?

We were happy to see that a dialogue is not only possible, but can also be beneficial to all parties involved. The discussion has been very much enriched by heterogeneous contributions, thanks to the presence not only of literary activists but also of representatives of the German cultural administration and of supporting foundations.

New approaches to audience: We want to share our excitement!

Photo: Ondrej Buddeus (©gezett.de)



On the matter of audience, the discussion broached a very central topic in the organisation of literary projects. It is not only a question of identifying target groups and inspiring them but equally about being inspired, in turn, by those audiences. Neither is it solely about how to involve people, especially encouraging people in rural areas to be enthusiastic about a project and collaborating with them.

Daniela Seel noted that in Berlin the audience is often linked to the character of the venue, not to the art form itself.

Andrea Inglese emphasised, for example, the importance of being aware of how young people communicate, mostly through a digital environment. As an organiser you have to respond to that and find new ways of disseminating dialogue.

” *This has been one of our explicit goals
— to introduce poetry to people who
think they can't read poetry.*

Inga Bodnarjuka highlighted the importance of showing as much diversity as possible and of being ready to interact with the audience. Some of the participants commented that literature combined with food, music or other art forms is often an effective way to engage the audience and increase attendance of particular events, especially when it is partially held in a foreign tongue. The idea of crossing borders with literature, fine arts, music and theory, mixing different artistic disciplines was subsequently proposed.

Collaboration with other art forms is essential: Crossing borders with literature and fine arts, music and theory.

A key discussion examined the relationship between the various branches of art: how a cultural idea, and indeed art, can merge and become intrinsically interdisciplinary, without separating. Creating or finding connections between the different branches was deemed very important by the majority of participants. For Laura Serkosalo of Nuoren Voiman Liitto the collaboration between various arts sectors is essential and always with the aim of connecting with other literary organisations. Founded as an interdisciplinary art association, Forum Stadtpark has always focused on connecting all art forms. Whilst organising his Enemies Project, Steven Fowler realised that the network grew more organically when mixing both art and music scenes.

Photo: Max Höfler, Daniela Seel, Steven Fowler (@gezett.de)



The artist as a curator:

Does simultaneously being an active writer and curator create a conflict of interest or a benefit?

The participants confronted each other on their different concepts and criteria for author selection and events organisation. One of the key issues was the role of the artist as curator. A number of significant questions came up:

- Do we diminish our talent as an artist when we organise?
- Does being an active writer, curator and organiser at the same time create a conflict of interests or rather a benefit?
- Can we obtain funding without compromising our values? Do we have to prostitute ourselves? The aesthetic and the political world are so different: can we mix them?
- What is our role?
- What is the role of politicians and what role do we require from them?
- Is a literary event an art form in and of itself?

For some, the principle of collaboration – letting people perform in the way they want without interfering – appeared to be essential. For them, it leads to the best, most innovative and natural results. Many participants reject giving authors themes or guidelines because the best work happens if it happens organically. On the other hand, part of the audience pointed out that we need to educate not only our audience but also the artists and writers.



The poet as a curator is a rare thing, most especially when considered next to the flexibility seemingly afforded to contemporary artists. In poetry, there seems to be a culture of denigration for the poet who has both creative and curatorial influence on their output.

Debating European identity through contemporary literature: It is all about connection, collaboration and friendship

As Daniela Seel observed, the conference identified that sometimes “an artist has to deal with issues of loneliness”. The CROWD project represents a chance to connect with other artists, writers, bloggers, translators, organisers; to plant the seeds of fruitful collaborations, inspiring discussions – and hopefully friendships too. A key to Europe’s independent literary scene.

Europe is a cultural myth. Yet, the mutually shared “geographical Europe” represents common ground. For this reason CROWD sees different language communities as a tremendous opportunity, enabling a collectively diverse debate on European identity through contemporary literature.

Photo: Katharina Deloglu, Lily Michaelidou,
Laura Serkosalo, Nora Hadjisotiriou (© Ulrike Techert)



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