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ESSAY
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Sébastien Hendrickx was a core member of Etcetera's editorial board from 2014 to 2022. He writes about performing and visual arts, teaches in the KASK, and works as a dramatist and performing artist. In this essay he highlight the political dimensions of *Nocturnes for a Society* that permeate all aesthetic layers, from process to outcome.



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LISTENING CLOSELY

About Nocturnes for a Society

In May, *Nocturnes for a Society* by Myriam Van Imschoot and Lucas van Haesbrouck [sic] premiered at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts. About eighty people gathered in a detached building on the banks of the Brussels canal shortly before sunset to participate in a sound performance that ended half a day later, shortly after sunrise on the other side of the water. Much of that time the audience was able to spend sleeping. How exactly was this beautiful, subdued nocturne composed in time and space? And what social imagination did it evoke?

Two months before the premiere. Myriam Van Imschoot is giving a seminar on *Nocturnes for a Society* for a class of theater scholars at UGent. A cloud of terms gradually appears on the blackboard as we are talking about the work. One in particular surprises me. 'Avant-garde'. Van Imschoot explains that she subscribes to the tradition of the avant-garde.

Wait. Hasn't all avant-garde become 'historical' by now, I ask. The idea that there is a small vanguard, paving the way of artistic and social progress for the masses who are lagging behind - what can we do with that in 2023?

Van Imschoot clarifies - I paraphrase - that she identifies anything but with the macho figure of the artist as a groundbreaking hero. She feels more for the credos 'everything is art' (Duchamp) and 'everyone is an artist' (Beuys). That dilettantism has conjured up a gigantic artistic toolbox, an endless range of possible artistic practices. And what about the political pretensions of the avant-garde? Van Imschoot likes the 'heteronomous' blurring of boundaries between art and life that many avant-garde artists pursued, though it may safely be stripped of all revolutionary pathos. Art can play some role in social change, but in a much more modest way than the manifestos made it seem.

THE AVANT-GARDE AMATEUR

Van Imschoot and her artistic sparring partner for this project, the lighting designer-scenographer Lucas van Haesbroeck, developed *Nocturnes for a Society* with their team through a series of public 'SESSIONS', moments in which they themselves or invited guests shared artistic practices with a gradually growing group of accomplices.

At the end of the premiere of *Nocturnes*, as you walk out, you see an impressive list of more than two hundred names of people who attended such sessions. Some of those participants, for example, helped make the felt blankets that are a key element of the final scenography. The bulk of the sessions revolved around sound, pre-eminently the sound of the human voice - the central instrument in Van Imschoot's oeuvre. Inspired by the deep listening practices of American composer Pauline Oliveros (1932-2016), the team invited participants to create and listen to sonorous environments together through simple scores. Musical expertise was not required for this, and that approachability is crucial.

When Oliveros addressed the question "*why have there been no 'great' women composers?*" in an influential article for the New York Times in 1970, she not only listed the societal obstacles that have always made it a lot harder for women to claim the position of composer. At the same time, she questioned the exclusive nature of the qualification 'great': "I*t does not matter that not all composers are great composers; it matters that this activity be encouraged among the population, that we communicate with each other in non destructive ways*."[1]

Van Imschoot's work also expresses the desire to truly democratise the dilettantism of the avant-garde into a more widely shared and collaborative cultural practice. The artist has long had a soft spot for the amateur, in the double sense of 'enthusiast' and '(eternal) beginner'. For many of her projects, she establishes 'communities of practice' - a term by which Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner refer to "*groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.* "[2] For example, IN KOOR! (in collaboration with Willem De Wolf, 2017) was performed by an unconventional amateur choir; for SPLASH! (2018), she and Christine De Smedt collaborated with swimming enthusiasts. In turn, the YouYou group, with whom Van Imschoot has been creating performances and films since 2014, consists of women of different ages and cultural backgrounds who together practice the youyou, an ancient vocal practice with roots in Africa and the Middle East.

Unlike these earlier projects, in which there was still a defined distinction between performers and audience, everyone who participates in the SESSIONS is an amateur among amateurs. I notice during one of the sessions that together, while practicing, you develop a particular aesthetic sensibility. You explore sounds, listening to how they differ from each other, how they subtly change under changing conditions. The aesthetic pushing of boundaries here happens gently, step by step. An avant-garde amateur seems more like a situationist walker than a futuristic race pilot.

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[1] Oliveros, Pauline, ‘And Don’t Call Them “Lady”Composers’ in: The New York Times, 13 september 1970.

[2] Wenger-Trayner, Etienne & Beverly, ‘Introduction to communities of practice. A brief overview of the concept and its uses’ in: https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/, juni 2015.

EIGHTY TIMES THIRTY MINUTES

In *Nocturnes for a Society,* art and life intertwine explicitly. The performance is a composition of sound practices à la Oliveros and everyday activities such as eating and sleeping, taken out of their usual, usually more private context for the duration of one night. As a social experiment, the work goes far beyond the fatalism and left-wing melancholy in which a good portion of the arts have for too long so conveniently indulged. We could even call it 'progressive', but in the way Bruno Latour interprets the term in his self-proclaimed "attempted manifesto", the 2010 Compositionist Manifesto: "*The nuance I want to outline is that between progress and progressive. It is as if we had to move from an idea of inevitable progress to one of tentative and precautionary progression.*"[3]

For the premiere of *Nocturnes*, some eighty participants gathered drop by drop between 7:30 and 8 p.m. at K1, a pavilion of KANAL-Centre Pompidou. The rectangular building has two spacious, open floors with large windows along its entire length overlooking the canal and the surrounding city. An information sheet tells me that we can 'arrive' for thirty minutes, "t*hirty minutes according to gut feeling.*" Then we get to open 'the gift' Those gifts are on a meter-long felt strip that runs through the second floor.



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Nocturnes for a Society not only has no clear starting hour; the program of the entire night will, it turns out, unfold independently of clock time. Each phase of the performance flows organically into the next, without the artistic team telling us what to do. From the beginning, by the way, the collaborators mingle relatively invisibly among the participants. Thus, there is no clear agency to which we can turn; after entering, we are each left sitting separately with our possible questions and confusion. It is quite possible that my thirty minutes differ greatly from the thirty minutes of the person next to me, who looks around somewhat pityingly. I myself experience a welcome

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[3] Latour, Bruno, ‘An Attempt at a “Compositionist Manifesto”’ in: New Literary History, 2010, pp. 473-474.

calm after a jam-packed day, but perhaps time is creeping forward confrontationally slowly for him? That time is hard to kill, because there is relatively little to do or see here. Talking doesn't happen either. There is, comparable to the behaviour in a church or a library, at most some whispering.

Lucas van Haesbroeck designed a sober and elegant scenography with low color saturation. In the grey interior of the two floors of K1, he placed predominantly grey and white elements: piles of moving blankets, pillows, mattresses, wooden benches,... The felt cloths hang down on ropes, with which we can adjust the height ourselves. Over all that shines a soft, yellow-white light, which only becomes visible as night falls. And the darker it is outside, the more the large windows transform into mirrors. Whereas before we could still look out far across the canal and the city, after that we see mostly the reflections of ourselves and the space in which we stand.

The only place in K1 that could provide some distraction is the separate room at the end of the second floor, where you can find the materials and explanations to make your own felt. Not my call, as I find that empty time and space, compared to the over-saturated outside world, just a blessing. Emptiness sharpens the senses: what seems nothing at first gradually gains importance and substance. Would I otherwise feel the breeze that suddenly sweeps through the building, or watch the light fall through the layered texture of the felt cloths? To bring the attention that Oliveros says 'deep listening' requires, the void just seems like a crucial condition.

SPINNING NORTH AND SOUTH

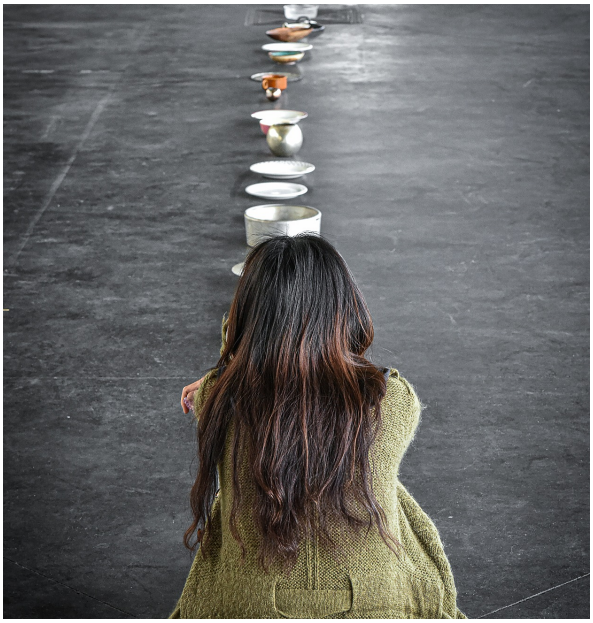
My gut tells me the thirty minutes are over. I open my gift. Like all the other gifts on the felt strip, it is a plate or bowl containing a number of tiny marbles. The colourful cloths in which the modest gifts are wrapped and the titles they were given charge each one, in a way, with its own character and identity. For a moment I hesitate between Free my Orbits and The Little Pig but I ultimately choose Between North and South. In my bowl there are two marbles, which from then on therefore represent North and South, although it is impossible to tell the identical marbles apart.



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A new info sheet teaches us that we can play these instruments by circling the balls in the plates or bowls, and in no time the entire building is crowded with avant-garde amateurs spinning marbles as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Zoom in and then out again, suggests one of the scores on the sheet. Up close, North and South turn out to sound very sharp, like a metallic miniature version of the Francorchamps Grand Prix. When I extend my listening range to the entire room, the hum becomes less harsh and also a lot more layered. There are more alternations, phase shifts within the overall impression of repetitiveness. Here and there, sonorous 'events' also stick out like signals against the background noise: someone tosses up marbles only to catch them again; an interaction between two participants briefly sends a burst of laughter through the room.

There. Vary, the information sheet urges me. Walk around the building, venture into trios or duets, and why not an entire orchestra? I disregard all these invitations, fulfilled as I am, I gradually notice, by a pleasant unwillingness to be creative. Let North and South swirl endlessly in that little bowl, with cracking the same tempo - the less original it sounds, the better I like it.

THE INDIVIDUAL BIRD

With the same attitude, I participate in the group song Move a Mountain later in the evening. We can vary on 'o, a, e, i, u or a sound of your own choice' but I stick to an elongated, monotonous 'eeeeeeee'. It is extraordinary to hear that 'eeeeeeee' and at the same time hear the larger, polyphonic whole into which one's own voice merges... Curiously enough, that whole rarely deteriorates into a complete cacophony. Why is it that in this multiplicity, patterns constantly emerge, that different voices merge time and again into a more or less coherent, polyphonic cosmos? Even more: the entire night is without clock time or conductor. So how do we as a group of strangers, without much talking, collectively make decisions? What makes us all suddenly sit downstairs on the benches eating soup, and then go upstairs to put in Move a Mountain?

Is it the info sheets? Those are only part of the answer. Throughout the nocturne, we get only three, with information that, by the way, remains very brief and suggestive. The whole of our interactions is sometimes akin to the flocking of birds. In the absence of a Head Bird leading the way, individual birds continually conform their own flight behaviour to their immediately surrounding peers. In addition to conformism, there is also a certain degree of autonomy - it is needed to make choices, to avoid a suddenly looming tower, for example - but birds' decision-making freedom is always distributed in a complex and dynamic way throughout the group.

Of course, we humans are not birds; our individual behaviour generally seems a lot more idiosyncratic, individualistic than that of an individual bird. Moreover, many lines of difference run through this particular group of strangers who spend the night together, in terms of character, sociability, gender, sexual preference, ethnic-cultural background, social values and norms,...

Even if not every single person from Brussels comes to the Kunstenfestivaldesarts, more than a unified 'community' we see here a 'society', full of undeniable diversity.

GRADATIONS OF PARTICIPATION

And so, after a while, the contours of the concrete utopia that seems to be tested in *Nocturnes for a Society* appear, with the necessary 'progressive precaution'. We find ourselves somewhere halfway on the spectrum between super-diverse society and community of practice; the refined austerity of the artistic practices and the focus on everyday actions evoke a possible culture reminiscent both of Zen Buddhist spirituality and of the 'enough' of the degrowth movement; the slightly anarchic indeterminacy that characterises the entire night appeals to the autonomy and sense of responsibility of each individual participant.

It is extraordinary to see how the nocturne manages to bridge interpersonal differences from time to time, if only for a moment. The shared artistic practices and circumstances provide a minimal form of togetherness. So does the relative absence of spoken language: the silence helps reduce any barriers between languages, sociolects, cultural and social frames of reference. Furthermore, it is crucial that different degrees of participation are possible. Not everyone needs to 'participate' equally hard all night. Withdrawing for a time or watching the event from a distance is also okay.

That recognition of difference paradoxically proves crucial to the socialising potential of this nocturnal experiment. You even notice it in how the mattresses are arranged: on the first floor they are crisscrossed and adventurously close together; upstairs there is more distance between them, for those who do need a bit more privacy in this context of intimacy between strangers.

And as befits experimentation, *Nocturnes for a Society* is also not free of some risk. There need only be a few aspiring Head Birds among the participants, or a slightly overenthusiastic false singer, a particularly loud snorer, a self-proclaimed shaman whose devout behaviour crosses the line of 'sanctity', an egotist hoarding too many blankets for himself, ... and the energy of the whole thing spirals into negativity.

EIGHTY DREAMS

Of most of the nocturne I remember nothing. In general, then, I rarely remember my dreams. To what extent are we influenced while dreaming by what preceded? Do our eighty different dreams align telepathically, a bit like that flock of birds in flight? Does something of a collective imagination emerge in this temporary society of sleepers? I have absolutely no idea.

What I do remember is the gentle awakening, the back and forth like ebb and flow between sleeping and waking. In that gray zone we can hear the soundscapes that, by the way, have been accompanying us all night, at times louder and more present and at other times subtly fading into the background in relation to the sounds created live. During most of the performance, the musician Christophe Albertijn bivouacs behind his laptop. There, he edits and combines the sounds that are constantly captured by fixed microphones and by a number of collaborators who discreetly roam the room like reporters with recording equipment at the ready. The sonorous cosmos Albertijn sends back sounds sometimes warm and soothing, sometimes ominously stormy.

The simultaneity of the digital echoes of earlier sounds and the analog sounds made in the now is reminiscent of Henri Bergson's snowball. It is perhaps the most famous of the many metaphors with which the philosopher used to describe time: a snowball rolling downward also always carries with it - swelling - the past in its current form. The various layers of time merge together; past and present are inseparable. Somewhere in Albertine's mix, North and South must still be swirling, and my elongated "eeeeeeee" keeps on echoing....

Yet something also comes to a definite end. The mirrors of K1 have become windows again. We see and hear how the city comes to life: cars, construction workers, screaming children, a siren,... Oh, there is someone waving across the canal! She beckons to us. Come, come, come! It's still a little chilly when we cross the bridge, back to all of our own day-to-day lives, but there are croissants and coffee waiting for us to warm ourselves for a while.