

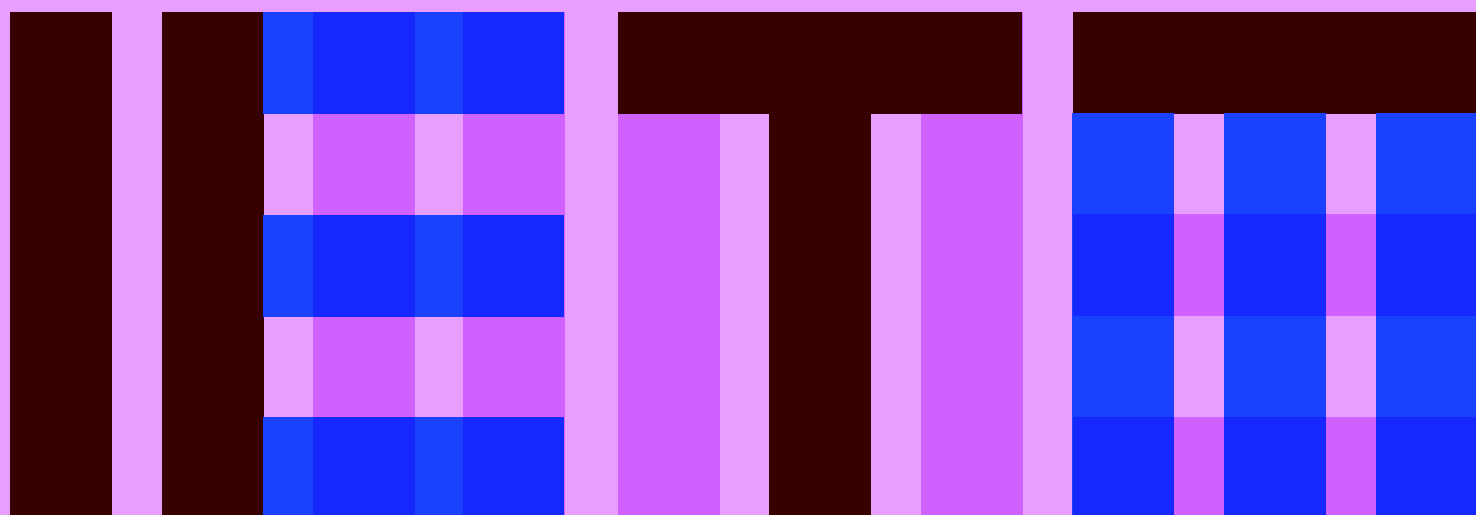


# Report

# *Art is not alone*

from the IETM Belgrade Plenary Meeting

By Goran Tomka



**IETM Report**  
*Art is not alone*  
by Goran Tomka**Report from the IETM Belgrade  
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## Summary of the report

What kind of struggles do art workers face in their everyday work? Why does artistic and cultural work often stay invisible and underpaid? Which are the possible alliances that can be formed to make these issues more visible and to improve the social position of art and cultural workers? These are some of the main questions that the panel from *ART IS NOT ALONE* has been dealing with. Coming from different cultural and professional contexts and having different experiences in various struggles of artists and cultural workers across Europe, panellists and the moderator brought in valuable insights and possible answers to these questions.

# Art is not alone

## WORKING SESSION

BY GORAN TOMKA

UNESCO Chair in cultural policy and management,  
Belgrade

### Moderator:

Vida Knežević  
Kontekst collective, Belgrade

### Speakers:

Kasia Wolińska,  
Choreographer, Germany

Fabiola Fiocco,  
Arts workers Italia, Italy

## Looking back: Current struggles and issues

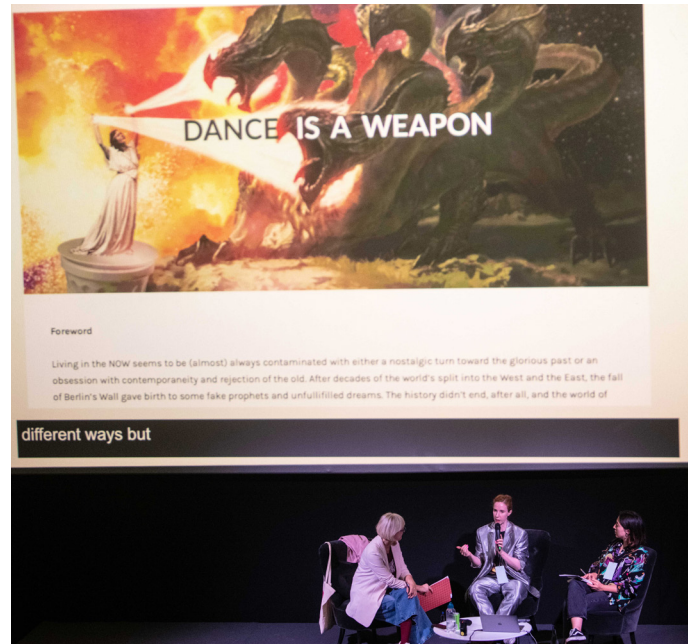
The underlying thread of this panel was the issue of the inadequate remuneration of artistic work, possible reasons for such a situation, as well as possible ways out of it. Artists at large have never been very privileged, at least in an economic sense. Their work is often seen as a pleasurable activity which is self-sufficient. Hence, this panel aimed at setting the record straight by discussing the materiality of arts and cultural workers' everyday life. While setting the tone of the debate, **Vida Knežević** recalled Brecht's protest; "*Can we stop thinking about big narratives, and remember that artists have to pay rent, eat and live?*"

### Unfair, unseen, and underpaid

Contributing to the unfavourable position of art workers is the fact that a lot of the actual work of artists is hidden from the eyes of the public, while only the most creative and perhaps enjoyable bits are revealed. Constant education, continual practice, networking, failed experiments and wasted proposals, auditions and pilots are all but visible and remunerated - yet it all constitutes a large part of everyday work and struggle of arts and cultural workers. As was discussed by panellists, this unseen and unpaid work resembles the work of mothers, caretakers and housewives for example, in that it is treated by policy-makers, funders and the public at large as either non-existing, or simply part of such societal role.

Offering reference to the work of Slovenian sociologist Katja Praznik, Vida quoted an [interview with her](#) in which she says that "*The absence of payment is making this labour invisible in the capitalist production where the wage nexus is what would recognize the artist as a worker who needs to be paid*". So, the improved position of arts and cultural workers is hard to imagine without that work being recognised and compensated.

At the same time, artists' struggle for better and fairer working conditions is itself barely visible. It's not just that the work remains unnoticed and unremunerated, but the issue stays hidden from the eyes of the public and even the main protagonists. Hence the necessity to act on the public discourse to increase visibility and understanding of what arts and cultural work is and could be. To gain a better understanding of the working conditions and workforce composition, as these are frequently ambiguous due to irregular contracts, *Arts workers Italia* has conducted a [survey](#) among its members and colleagues and the numbers, although expected, are still startling. As shown by Fabiola Fiocco, 55.1% of art commissions come with no contract; 48.9% of art workers have an annual income lower than 10.000EUR; 36% of art workers have not been paid for their work or have received partial compensation; and 78.9% have one or more jobs outside contemporary arts. This paints a bleak image of arts work and such a situation is far from specific to Italy.



IETM Belgrade Plenary Meeting © Dragan Mujan

### "Can we the cultural workers speak?"

The crucial element of the struggle is to make this shared position visible both inside and outside the field. This is where some sort of labour unionising is inevitable. As the old union slogan goes, "*United we bargain, alone we beg*". Here however, lies many issues. As Vida has noted, "only few artists are choosing to be part of labour unions" and instead "the majority of artists chose other ways of struggling", mostly alone. Thus, cultural workers as a group rarely speak with one strong voice.

### "Dance is not enough"

According to **Kasia Wolińska**, the lack of that voice could be attributed to the lack of class consciousness. In order for wider joint fronts to be made, there needs to be consciousness that a certain societal position is shared. This is why Kasia turns to history. For her: "*There is a lack of historical understanding; we're not class aware - and not aware of the root of some tools that we are using that we might never use if we knew the context of their becoming*".

Such understanding is underpinning her work around the [Dance is a weapon](#) blog. Following Vida's Brechtian quote, Kasia said that instead of ephemerality, she is interested in "*solid bodies, in materialities of dancing*". However, this materiality is not self-explanatory. So, contrary to popular claims that everything is political, including dance by the same token, Kasia claims that "**dance is not political**", unless it becomes so. And that requires a process of building such consciousness which often also requires historical excursions, something that is often beyond access to dancers' usual training.

**Vida confirmed this claim by quoting Kasia:** "*Yes, indeed. Here, many artists are not often aware of the past experiences of dancers and their struggles. For example, dancers in the partisan movement of Yugoslavia*".

### Artists are not alone

Moreover, this somewhat solitary position of cultural workers is only worsened by the lack of wider alliances of resistance. This is indeed what the title suggests: that artists and cultural workers could become part of much wider struggles, because their position is not so peculiar, they share this position with many others indeed. As Vida suggested, "*if you want to understand the institution of art, you must simultaneously understand the class relations outside the institution of visual arts*".

## How can we, cultural workers, improve our labour conditions? Some approaches and cases.

### Solidarity on the horizon

Starting with Serbia, Vida has presented one of the most recent and most important developments in the field of arts and work. Namely, the recently transformed Association of Fine Arts of Serbia has initiated a series of research and activities dealing with the horizontality of art work. Together with the Association of Independent Art Scene of Serbia and a few other representative associations, like association of art critics AICA, STANICA, and national Union Independence (their culture and media branch), they have jointly started *Solidarity Fund* at the beginning of the pandemic. It was a crucial moment because many independent artists have overnight lost all their income, their sick leave compensation and other support measures. They have not only collected funds but also raised the profile of these work-related issues, stressing the importance of political engagement and unionising of artists. Their main goal was to promote public funding of artists and to encourage a wide range of artists to organise themselves. And in relation to unionising, Vida, stressed that *“the prolonged antagonism between the institutional scene, in which unions exist but are quite passive, and the independent scene, in which unions do not exist but there are some representative associations of cultural workers which function as para-unions”*. This and similar initiatives *“give hope that things can change for the better”*, concluded Vida.

### Emergenza continua

The next initiative that also gave hope and represented a very inspiring case was the work of the newly established association of Art Workers Italia (AWI). Coming from the heart of the initiative, Fabiola Fiocco shared some of the key points and milestones of their work. It started in March 2020 as a Facebook group titled *Emergenza continua* (Ongoing emergency), and has developed into a large, informal initiative of artists and cultural workers fighting for the improvement of their working conditions. It became obvious that *“we needed to create a structure that could host that energy and make use of experiences that we were gathering within the group”*. Therefore, the process of making an association has begun. As such, *“we try to create networks of alliances and solidarities”*, underlined Fabiola. *“We are particularly interested in the idea of sharing and redistribution of resources.”*

Apart from sharing strategies to survive and sharing of resources, the association also does a lot of lobbying and advocacy, and maybe most importantly in the long run, AWI is creating open and free tools to be used by artists to improve their own struggles and working conditions. These tools include guidelines for artists and curators for art workers' rights, minimum fees, FAQ, Contract Templates, Guidelines for Cultural organisations and many more.

Beside education and support, the work of the Association also covers promotion, dissemination and networking. A lot of work, according to Fabiola, is dedicated to collaborations with other groups. They have for example supported the occupation of Piccolo Teatro in Milan, and also worked on regional and European levels and *“intersecting planes of action”* with actors and networks beyond national borders.

Another important process was the collective writing of the **MANIFESTO**, which was published on the symbolically important 1st of May 2020. It was signed by around 900 workers. *“That collective writing was a practice of self-determination,”* noted Fabiola. *“Through this work, we have already identified important lines of action, as well as the first collective presentation of ourselves in the public”*. As a result this initiative went public from May 2020.

Transnational exchange and collaboration, in addition to national and local engagement, is indeed an important part of AWI's work. As an example, they are the initiator of the project **“HYPERUNIONISATION”** which is an international online platform aiming to foster a transnational network of groups, institutions and organisations focusing on the rights of cultural workers in Europe and worldwide. The key questions of the project were:

- How to strike?
- How to institute?
- How to get paid?

Implemented with the support of the European Cultural Foundation, it brought together many different institutional and non-institutional actors from the field to discuss these questions. The collaboration with non-artistic organisations, such as the unionising experience of Foodora riders in Turin, was crucial to look beyond one's sector, learning from common struggles and creating new alliances.

### Politicisation of dance practice

Kasia presented a somewhat different approach to the topic. Her work revolves around making ideological underpinnings of arts work, in her case dance, more visible. In her words, she is *“interested in offering dancers an introduction to politics and history of dance ideologies”*. One of her struggles is *“how to make politics and history less elitist and more accessible”*. Indeed Kasia noted that digging through history and hearing about it, might not always be fun for many people.

Fortunately, Kasia herself comes from a dance background. She is neither academic, nor historian, but as she was working on her first dance piece after her graduation, she came across a telegram that the Soviet government had sent to the American dancer Isidora Dancan in which they invited her to the Soviet Union and offered her to have a school there. She is considered either as a mother of modern dance, or as a marginal character, depending on whom you ask (she was unpopular in the USA and very popular across Europe). Her life and her very controversial position has drawn Kasia into history, something that she is still fond of doing. It opened a whole new world. That is even more interesting knowing that Kasia comes from Poland. So, it took her active engagement with ideology and history to become aware of things that have shaped her life.

As she described it: *“I realised what socialism was when I came to Berlin. In Poland communism is presented as the ultimate evil. For example, my parents would never claim to be socialist, even though my mother was a workers union leader for many years. For me moving to the West to study dance is moving to civilization, towards progress. And there, I started looking at what was hidden.”* In a way, she could only discover socialism in the West, and started her blog as an act against a movement of denialism towards these ideologies. In the process, finding herself in the context which is devoid of ideological links to socialism, she has started reclaiming the artistic and cultural legacy of it. She has therefore found her historical explorations worthy and decided to share her path.

As an example of new artistic possibilities that opened with this new consciousness is the case of the New Dance group. They used dance movements in an 'avant-garde socialist way', by for example offering dance classes in factories for very low price, explained Kasia. *“This story confirmed to me that dance can contribute to wider social struggles. This is important because we are being told in Berlin that we are parasitic to society.”* *“By studying dance and political history, you can find your lineage and decide on the future of your work”*, she concluded.

Kasia then mentioned that she published *‘Danceolitics’*, a free, experimental book which discusses the nexus of dance and politics. It is an invitation for dancers to explore their ideological positions, but also their own artistic practices which are always shaped by these wider structures and ideas. She has invited different dance practitioners to reflect on some crucial questions revolving around the relation between dance and politics. *“I have a very weird collection of texts”*, Kasia confessed.

She defined her approach as leftist populist, wondering how we can make things less elitist and more accessible: *“making something accessible doesn't mean that it is devoid of meaning. Actually, I think that we are often enclosed in discourse, so once you remove complex discourse, there is not much left. So I am interested in the opposite movement.”*



## What are the ways forward?

The panel felt that despite the worrying conditions, beneath the surface there is a wealth of new initiatives that are trying to tackle the issue of artistic and cultural work. As it is hopefully evident from this brief overview, both the quantity and diversity of these initiatives are amazing.

First, some unpleasant questions need to be tackled. The Covid pandemic showed that in tough times, these tough questions might also arise. As Fabiola has put it: *"We have to deconstruct the heroic idea of art just as of activism. Because it can be a way for self-exploitation as well."*

Second, new habits need to be formed. For example, across the artistic world, talking about money is considered very unpleasant because art is about something less material. But an important way to materialise the "dark matter" of arts work, as Fabiola defines it, *"is to talk about money. And also become aware of the ways we work. But often such discussion requires a level of academic and intellectual competencies."*

That is why coming together is essential. Fortunately, there is a wealth of new, more or less formal, associations and networks of artists and cultural workers that are bringing people together. Apart from the few that have been described in more detail, other initiatives are forming across Europe, such as ZASEK (Association of creative workers of Slovenia) and Dance association of Berlin (Zeitgenössischer Tanz Berlin). Their work is essential for raising the profile of these issues and sharing strategies and tactics of struggle. This is especially important because some administrative and bureaucratic settings direct artists and cultural workers in different directions. As Kasia noted, *"Everyone in Berlin in the scene runs their own hyper-individualised business in the form of an entrepreneur, and we do taxes, management, bookkeeping."* And while that might be most economical or practical, new forms of being together have to counter-balance such atomisation.

Fourth, the work of (re)politisation is showing new forms of work that are very active, conscious, and well driven. It is about endless meetings, workshops, creation of networks of support and inspiration for anyone who wants to make their work more political.

Fifth, education is key: research and mapping, books, pamphlets and websites, seminars and educational programmes, all of them together create a new landscape of knowledge inviting the exploration and creation of new awareness. In that direction "works the Glossary" drafted by AWI, aims at strengthening the knowledge of the words and concepts we are using.

Finally, we are also seeing new granting approaches on the Horizon. For example, Tanzpraxis is a scholarship in the form of the basic income and 41 dance artists from different generations in Berlin were granted a monthly scholarship without needing to do any work. This opens a lot of room for learning, coming together and questioning.

Speaking of horizons, what does this all mean for the future struggles of artists and cultural workers? There seems to be a very crowded horizon of change. Small gusts of thought and action are coming together and we can feel the wind of change. Even if there is a single logic of exploitation, there are many logics of resistance. To conclude with Fabiola's words: *"In every move we make, I see what Ewa Majewska calls "weak resistance" as she talks of the everyday act of resistance of women and marginalised people. So, I don't see one big, joint revolutionary horizon, but a lot of small steps and visions forward."*



