

Restating/Resituating the “State of the Art”

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In February 2014, the government of Flanders launched a new logo to promote the region’s international visibility by giving it a clearer identity. The previous logo, which showed a sketchy and rather vicious lion, stretching its claws and sticking its tongue out, was replaced with the supposedly more amicable, yet still quite daring, image of a lion’s face whose fluid contours had to suggest courage and safety, rather than the violent protectionism evoked by the former version. Yet the most interesting part of this restyling operation had to do with the slogan that was added to the image and the name of Flanders: while in Dutch it reads as “Verbeelding Werkt” (“Imagination Works”), Flemish governors refrained from using the literal translation of the phrase for the English variant, changing it instead into “State of the Art.”¹ Perhaps not surprisingly, shortly after the new logo was launched, one citizen commented on the Flemish government’s website that it “should be ‘Region of Art’ not ‘State of Art.’”² Conscious of the not so innocent choice of terms, this commentator aimed to point at the rather tensed political situation in Belgium, where Flanders and Wallonia are – for the time being at least – not entirely autonomous states, but distinct regions of one federally organized country. Responding to this online intervention, the editor-in-chief of the campaign, Lisa Bradshaw, posted a note, saying that the “reference to that common phrase” is also “a play on words because the government is keen to market Flanders as a centre of arts & culture.”

This seemingly minor online discussion is significant for at least two reasons. Firstly, even while the government’s choice for the term “state” might be part of the “common phrase” the slogan intends to hint at, it is difficult to avoid the impression that some claim for regional sovereignty underlies the decision to use the English expression “State of the Art,” instead of the literal translation of the Dutch slogan or any other variant branding designers could have come up with. Secondly, the response by the campaign’s editor-in-chief tellingly reveals the larger agenda behind this entire restyling operation, as it demonstrates how the so-called “arts & culture” are usurped, if not colonized, for promotional ends that may very well have nothing to do with the ideological undercurrents and political beliefs of the actual artistic practices the phrase “State of the Art” is said to

represent. The message the slogan wants to convey is obviously one of Flanders being at the forefront of the global art world, as it can pride itself on an incredibly vivid arts scene that thrives on an experimental attitude challenging predominant conventions or art historical legacies. The fact that probably most of the artists would rather identify themselves as belonging to the Belgian or even the global state of the art does not seem to be an issue.



Figure 1.1a and 1.1b The Flemish and English variant of the logo promoting the region of Flanders.

The “State of the Art” is, from this perspective, a vexed and politically charged matter that, also from an academic point of view, raises certain expectations. In academia, the “state of the art” is what scholars are generally required to provide when applying for research funding. It is most commonly the first part of application templates in which applicants are expected to demonstrate mastery of their field by explicating what kind of investigations have been done so far, what aspects or focuses have been lacking, and which gaps one is able to fill in. It is a rhetorical exercise that compels one to conform to a given format, even if your research would not entirely fit into the preconceived schemes imposed by funding organizations. As Pascal Gielen and Nele Wynants argue in their contribution to this issue, especially the burgeoning rise of practice-as-research and artistic PhDs puts traditional systems of scientific assessment and valorization under pressure, insofar as artist-inspired approaches to fundamental research in and on the arts profoundly challenge conventional ways of generating new knowledge as well as disseminating research results. In contrast to the United States, the United Kingdom, and – in more recent years – also the Scandinavian countries, where pursuing a MA or PhD degree at arts departments is more closely linked to developing an individual artistic practice, there is a much deeper rift between theory and practice running across the West-European continent. Here, the theorization of aesthetics has long been considered a domain largely separate or independent from artistic practice as such, perhaps not so much by scholars themselves (or at least not all of them), but undeniably so by the institutional machinerie surrounding their work.³ It is only since the early 2000s (and for reasons I will explain shortly) that cross-overs between academic research *on* the arts and practical inquiries *within* the arts have received more outspoken encouragement from policy makers, university administrations, and evaluation panels.

Localizing Theater Studies

Not only theater studies, but also the adjacent fields of dance and performance studies, have developed in various parts of the world along different and asynchronous rhythms, even if globalization has fostered the circulation of knowledge and critical thought. In this light, it is perhaps more than ever time for a critical reassessment of the “state(s)” in which we find ourselves and to ask how these local conditions inevitably shape the otherwise internationally oriented purview of the scholarly study of theater, dance, and performance. This special issue of *Documenta* wants to tackle the question of the so-called “state of the art” heads-on by taking stock of what it means to be a part of a “state,” not only in a geographical sense, but also in terms of the more virtual state of intellectual and

artistic legacies, particularly those that have impregnated theater studies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In other words, while the focus of this issue lies on the rise and development of theater studies in the specific “state” called Flanders, the main question that lies behind it runs deeper. The locality of the contributions ought to become exemplary for larger developments within the field in that they each raise the question as to how scholarly research and educational curricula have attempted to keep pace with the most incisive changes in artistic practice. In this respect, the region of Flanders can serve as a case in point, not in the least because of the allegedly unprecedented outburst of creative energy the Flemish performing arts scene has witnessed from the early 1980s onwards and which – as I will discuss in more depth below – was soon granted the mythologizing label of the “Flemish Wave.”

By approaching Flanders as a specific case that demonstrates how the interactions between the performing arts and academia are a steering force in the development of both artistic practice and scholarly research, this issue ties in with a recent tendency to open up local fields of the academic study of the performing arts to wider international audiences. A growing number of publications testify to the increasing awareness that the Anglo-American domination of the field needs to be recalibrated by paying more attention to the manner in which theater, dance, and performance studies have developed along distinct lines in different parts of the world (see, e.g., Allsopp; Alting van Geusau et al.; Citron et al.; Finburg and Lavery; Georget and Guillaume; Manning and Ruprecht; McKenzie et al.; Wilmer). This attention to local traditions and currents should not be misunderstood as a protectionist gesture, but rather as an attempt to go against the encroaching grasp of globalization, which is always at risk of leveling out differences in favor of uncomplicating the “state of the art.”⁴ As literary scholar Jean-Michel Rabaté writes in his chapter “How Global Should Theory Be?,” a genuine commitment to theory “opposes the ideology of globalization that believes everything to be translatable immediately or without loss” (14). According to Rabaté, the function of theory lies elsewhere, insofar as it consists of “concepts and logical chains of reasons inserted in a specific context determined by history, language and culture” that cannot do otherwise than “to face squarely the problem” raised by “today’s general drift toward homogenization in the name of globalization” (15). Rabaté’s view on theory has even greater resonance in the current Trump-era, which seems to foster the oversimplification of global affairs in political discourse. In this supposedly “globalized” context, it might be all the more necessary to devote attention to the local complexities and subtleties of the multiple “states of the art” that any given field is comprised of.

A similar kind of multiplicity is also inherent in how the notion of “theater studies” is used and understood throughout this issue. When developing the editorial concept note and sending it out to invite potential authors, it already occurred to me that “theater studies” was in fact a too limited term to reflect the broad scholarly interest at Flemish universities in a wide and varied range of what – again by lack of a better term – can be described as “performative practices,” including not only theater but also dance, performance, media art, photography, circus, opera, pop culture, social movements, and so on. In itself, this is hardly remarkable: in the past few decades, the field of theater studies has only intensified and expanded the interdisciplinary scope it arguably always had (see, e.g., Buglioni; Fischer-Lichte, “Quo Vadis?”; Pavis). This has not been different for theater studies in Flanders, which has shown a particular keenness to absorb theoretical methodologies and artistic tendencies not directly related to theater in the strict sense of the term. While this expansion of the discipline’s contours may cause one to pause over the accuracy of “theater studies” as its heading, the choice to stick to the term and to give it a prominent place in this issue’s subtitle deliberately intends to highlight the institutional organization of theater studies as it has developed in Flanders and elsewhere in Europe. On the European Continent, the name “theater studies” has functioned as the main banner under which early generations of scholars marched to carve out a legitimate space for the study of the performing arts within academia and, as such, it has long remained in place. In Flanders, it has been only relatively recently that research groups and university curricula began to choose for other labels that are more representative of either their scope or specific focus.

The formation of theater studies in Flanders has only partially been scrutinized and primarily through writings published in Dutch, which obviously places severe limitations on the breadth of its potential readership.⁵ This stands in stark contrast with the widespread circulation of the Flemish performing arts on various stages across the globe and the ensuing scholarly attention the artistic productivity of this small region has been receiving internationally. In 2010, for instance, theater scholars Lourdes Orozco and Peter Boenisch guest edited a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* specifically devoted to Flemish theater. In their editorial introduction, they express their hope “to stimulate some understanding, to prompt a debate, and to open up to an international readership the discourses that have shaped contemporary Flemish theater over the past thirty years” (404). This issue of *Documenta* can be regarded as a direct response to the call raised by Orozco and Boenisch, even though it aspires not only to *restate* but also to *resituate* the manner in which both the performing arts and

theater studies in Flanders grew into local microcosms vibrant with creative energy and susceptible to international influences.

It is this double gesture of restating/resituating the current “state of the art” that underpins this issue, as it simultaneously intends to reaffirm and to critically question the state of theater studies in Flanders by demonstrating the productivity of the field and by keeping a sharp eye on the difficulties and ongoing challenges. The same dynamic also informs the editorial choice to combine historical with contemporary perspectives and to restate the founding years of theater studies in Flanders as well as Wallonia (Van Den Dries; Vanhaesebrouck), while also resituating the field through a look at its more recent formations (Philipsen; Stalpaert; Gielen and Wynants). The two artists’ contributions in the “Portfolio”-section further deepen this double-sided angle by not only reinstating artistic practice as a mode of reasoning in its own right, but also by making the opposite move and to reconsider the function of discourse (Velissariou) and theory (Vickers and Quesada) from an artist’s perspective.

Any “state of the art” is inevitably a snapshot, a partial and selective view on those affairs that seem to matter at a given point in time. Accordingly, this issue does not pretend to provide an exhaustive overview of either the development or the current state of theater studies in Flanders. Rather than making an appeal to comprehensiveness, which would be neither attainable nor desirable, this issue presents a range of perspectives that chart some of the territory from where theater studies in Flanders emerged, while also giving a hint of the directions where the field is heading to. My own aim with this introductory essay, then, is not only to articulate the intentions behind this issue and to unfold the different connotations attached to its title, but also to offer a broader contextual framework that, hopefully, will help to (re-)situate some of the questions and arguments raised by the authors in their respective contributions. To this end, this introduction will further outline, in very broad strokes, the main artistic and institutional developments as well as the creative and intellectual legacies that have steered, and continue to steer, research on the performing arts in Flanders, both when it emerged and as it is currently pursued.

Bracketing the “Flemish Wave”

Clear anchor points always come in handy when developing a “state of the art,” and so too is one of the primary threads running throughout this issue, the phenomenon of the so-called “Flemish Wave.” Several authors refer to the “Flemish Wave” as a formative moment in the recent history of both the

performing arts scene and theater studies in Flanders, even though they also acknowledge that the very notion of a “wave” has been fiercely – and rightly so – contested.⁶ The use of one label for a gamut of artistic experimentations taking place across Flanders from the early 1980s onwards obviously tends to generalize the very distinct approaches towards making theater and dance that artists were exploring at that time. Because of the still widespread usage of the “Flemish Wave” in various circles, it is sometimes forgotten that the term as such was actually imported from the Netherlands and already subject to criticism when it first entered into discourse. In a 1987 article, for instance, the Flemish dramaturg Marianne Van Kerkhoven notes that the idea of a “Flemish Wave as a unified movement is an illusion” (11). “This ‘movement’ is no movement” (4), she states, insofar as there was no unifying artistic poetics or ideological agenda that bound together the disparate practices of the artists generally associated with the “Flemish Wave.”⁷

Next to generalization, the probably most decisive side-effect of the omnipresence of the “Flemish Wave” as a label has been the formation of a canon of artists who are often grouped together while leaving out many others. Hardly anyone would doubt the art historical importance of the works created in the early 1980s by currently renowned choreographers such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Marc Vanrunxt, or Wim Vandekeybus; or by leading theater artists, such as Jan Lauwers, Lucas Vandervost, Ivo van Hove, or Jan Fabre. But there is in a similar sense no doubt that the alleged revival of the Flemish performing arts scene during those years involved a great deal of other artists who are considerably less frequently mentioned, just as the years leading up to this period of the so-called “Flemish Wave” are still a major blank spot in the historiography of the performing arts in Flanders and, by extension, in Belgium. As theater scholar Thomas Crombez points out in his discussion of the canonization of the “Flemish Wave,” “generational labels ... tend to obscure the artists who do *not* fit the implied narratives,” with the ultimate result that “the different, and possibly jagged, temporalities in theatre history are rendered invisible” (260).⁸

All too often, the “Flemish Wave” is pictured as a sudden booming of artistic experimentations within a wasteland that was severely suffering from creative sclerosis. Even if there may be a certain truth to this picture, it becomes particularly problematic when a complex phenomenon like this is reduced to a mythical birth, to a singular moment in time when it all started and to which the entire contemporary performing arts scene in Flanders can be traced back. Even in spite of all the critical accounts of an unwarranted use of the “Flemish Wave” as

a generalizing category, the tendency to essentialize it still persists. In his contribution to *Een theatergeschiedenis der Nederlanden* (*A Theater History of the Netherlands*, 1995), for example, theater scholar Freddy Decreus refers to a 1981 staging of Friedrich Hebbel's *Maria Magdalena* by director Jan Decorte as the moment when "the 'Flemish Wave' was *born*," insofar as "all theatrical conventions were unhinged" in a manner that seemed to supersede anything else that could be seen on Flemish stages around that time (822; italics added). In a more recent interview, the now deceased Eric Antonis, one of Flanders' most esteemed cultural politicians, aligns "*the beginning* of the 'Flemish Wave'" with the increased interest of the Netherlands in Flemish theater directors, such as Ivo van Hove or Luk Perceval (Hillaert n.p.; italics added). By resorting to a terminology of beginnings and births, such statements testify – albeit inadvertently – to the habitual inclination to look for the magical point of commencement that heralded the beginning of a new period.

Straightforward historical accounts like these should raise suspicion, since the alignment of broad developments such as the "Flemish Wave" with clear-cut origins undoes their breadth and leads to canonized histories that single out a handful of either artists or performances that come to stand in for what were, in effect, much larger and further-reaching shifts within a particular environment. From a methodological point of view, the customary tendency to impose a certain sense of causality on what are, in "fact," rather messy and tangled histories, attests to the ongoing need to incorporate a Foucauldian sense of genealogy within theater historical research. In his famous 1971 essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault draws on Nietzsche to make a useful distinction between "Ursprung" ("origin"), on the one hand, and "Herkunft" ("descent") and "Entstehung" ("emergence"), on the other hand (145). Opposing traditional historiography's concern with the search for "origins," Foucault posits that genealogy, under the auspices of "Herkunft," "does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity," but rather allows itself to see "passing events in their proper diversion" (146), which – as he, importantly, notes – also "attaches itself to the body" (147). The notion of "Entstehung," in turn, is less concerned with the dispersive movements through which moments pass by, pass over, or are passed on, accounting instead for "the moment of arising" (148). But again, this "apparition" is never reducible to a singular cause, as it "is always produced through a particular stage of forces" (148-149).⁹

(Re)turning to Foucault to (re)affirm his position as a philosopher of theater might seem overdue, but it holds particular relevance when looking at the

thoughts and concerns collected in this issue. Taken together, the contributions map parts of the “particular stage of forces” that led to the “emergence” (or “Entstehung”) of theater studies in Flanders, while they also focus on the “descent” (or “Herkunft”) of contemporary tendencies, drawing multiple lines between Flemish theater studies as it was and as it stands now. In this respect, it should be emphasized that the recurrent references to the “Flemish Wave” throughout this issue are not intended to solidify the canonizing effects that cling to the label. Instead, the notion is rather pragmatically used to convey how a sudden upsurge of creative energy did flood the grounds of a region that, until then, had received hardly any international recognition in terms of artistic production. As such, the idea of a “Flemish Wave” functions primarily as a periodical term to highlight how a rejuvenation of the performing arts scene in Flanders fostered the institutional anchoring of theater studies as an academic field. There is, in the end, no doubt that the upcoming and increasingly visible artistic field in Flanders has been a pivotal impetus for theater studies to gain a foothold in Flemish universities.

But this is only half of the story, because it also worked the other way around: just as the expanding performing arts scene in Flanders exposed the need for a discursive field like theater studies to account for the significant changes going on at the level of practice, so too did theater scholars begin to generate a critical discourse that legitimized the performing arts, demonstrating how certain staging practices may surpass the level of mere entertainment and can be as intellectually challenging as the more revered areas of literature or the visual arts. In this regard, it is interesting that both Luk Van den Dries and Karel Vanhaesebrouck point in their contributions towards a similar triangular dynamic that undergirded the emergence of theater studies in Belgium. While Van den Dries offers a historical overview of the gradual establishment of theater studies in Flanders, Vanhaesebrouck complements this perspective by looking across the language border to find out how theater studies developed in Wallonia. Both their accounts show how the rise of theater studies as a field was fueled not only by a booming artistic performance practice, but also by the public outlet provided by newly founded magazines specifically devoted to the performing arts, such as *Etcetera* and *Documenta* for Flanders, or *Alternatives théâtrales* for Wallonia.¹⁰ The third factor that fostered the coming of age of the performing arts scene and, by extension, theater studies in Flanders was the establishment of various new art venues, such as Proka in Ghent, Kaaitheter in Brussels, CET in Antwerp, or Théâtre 140 in Schaerbeek.¹¹ As these venues were cropping up in various cities throughout Flanders from the late 1960s into the 1980s, they began

to form an alternative circuit of performance spaces that were particularly keen to present and support the experimental work of newly emerging performing artists. Both magazines and institutions thus enhanced the visibility of the innovative undercurrents in the Flemish performing arts, creating a favorable climate for theater studies too. The challenge for theater scholars, however, was “to keep p(e)ace” with these significant developments in theater practice, which were still to be ratified on an academic level. After all, the intention to smuggle theater studies into academia meant that these early scholars had to navigate between the impatient desire of artists to overturn the established structures of the Flemish performing arts scene and the typically slow institutional machinery of university departments.

“Keeping p(e)ace” was indeed probably one of the greatest tasks that theater studies in Flanders was confronted with during the process of establishing itself as a legitimate branch of research within an academic environment in which theater and other performing arts were hardly considered topics worthy of scholarly study. From both an institutional and historical point of view, then, the emergence of theater studies in Flanders taps into the much-debated issue as to how art theory and artistic practice can feed one another, not only through mutually illuminating collaborations, but also through the shared attempt of “keeping p(e)ace” with each other. This struggle is obviously not limited to the local Flemish context and can only reaffirm how, also in other countries, fierce battles have been fought to conquer a place for the performing arts within academia. As such, the local stories that are told throughout this issue come to stand in for larger tales of subversions and transgressions that might reverberate across many other regions.

Institutional Incisions

Historically speaking, there is a certain irony that permeates the process by which theater studies in Flanders attempted to emancipate itself within academia: whereas the increased sense for experiment in the performing arts buttressed the gradual establishment of theater studies at Flemish universities, it was only by separating academic research on the arts from research within the arts that a space for academic recognition could be carved out. A key strategy to achieve some degree of autonomy for theater studies was indeed to differentiate theoretical studies from artistic research, even though this alleged separation was more often an institutional matter or a rhetorical exercise rather than living up to the reality of how scholarly research on the performing arts was actually conducted. As the contributions of Luk Van den Dries, Christel Stalpaert, and

Karel Vanhaesebrouck poignantly demonstrate, pioneering scholars who steered the establishment of theater studies in Flanders (such as Carlos Tindemans, Jaak Van Schoor, Dina Hellemans, or Ludo Verbeeck) recognized from the very beginning the necessity to ground research on theater *in* the concrete reality of theatrical practices. Or, as Van den Dries puts it, “theater studies grew in and from theater practice,” not in the least because the arduous efforts of this early generation to smuggle courses on theater into the existing curricula of German Philology or Literary Studies stemmed, above all, from “a passionate interest in Flemish theater.”

The paradox is that the very struggle to find institutional recognition for theater studies as a scholarly field in its own right ultimately reinforced the habitual rift between theory and practice that, as I mentioned earlier, still runs quite deeply across Continental Europe. The reasons behind this rift are manifold and intricately complex, as they also vary between different national contexts and local tendencies, but there are at least two main factors that seem to stand out. For many years, the emergence of fields like theater, dance, or performance studies was met by a certain suspicion from the side of artists who were reluctant towards the theorization of their work that would flatten it to reductive, abstract, or mainly conceptual schemes of analysis that had hardly anything to do with the phenomenal experience of seeing a certain piece for what it is or has to offer. To a certain extent, this suspicion may have been justified. Especially in this early period, theater studies was heavily influenced by theoretical paradigms such as semiotics and structuralism, which might have fostered the impression that the scholarly analysis of theater aimed to systematize the complexity of the theatrical event into rigid categorical frameworks.¹² However, as I will discuss in more depth in the next section, theater studies soon embraced other intellectual influences, not in the least because of the rising field of performance studies that, particularly in Flanders, found a wide resonance. From the moment theater studies opened up its frontiers to become a genuinely interdisciplinary discipline, it went beyond the adherence to structuralist semiotics and turned into a much more diversified field that gladly incorporated a variety of approaches in order to assess not only the hermeneutic meanings but also the political ramifications *and* sensorial experiences provoked by the performing arts.¹³ Also in this respect, differences between distinct national contexts come into play, as not every country picks up on certain intellectual tendencies at the same pace. In the case of Flanders, however, it is clear that the eventual expansion of theater studies coincided with a continuous broadening of the theoretical horizon, which to a

great extent was spurred by the innovative work of the so-called “Flemish Wave”-artists that challenged conventional modes of interpretation and analysis.

The second and probably more important reason why the establishment of theater studies at Flemish universities seemingly engraved the rift between theory and practice stemmed from the traditional institutional organization of higher education. While these institutional structures are not specific to Flanders and can also be found, albeit under different names or titles, in other European countries (and, to some extent, also in the UK and the USA), the Flemish context can serve as a case in point here. Until 2003, two main categories structured Flemish higher education: universities and university colleges (“hogescholen”). Whereas universities offered primarily academic education geared towards fundamental research, university colleges often provided more practical training in a variety of professions, ranging from the arts to teaching, nursing, social work, journalism, etc. This differentiation between universities and university colleges corresponds to the German division between institutions that focus on academic *Bildung* and the *Fachhochschulen* that offer professional training (see also Giersdorf 27). Or, with regard to Anglo-Saxon countries, one could refer to the difference between academic programs at universities versus the vocational programs at conservatory-like institutions, even though both the UK and the US have a longer tradition in integrating practical training within university environments. The point is that, already on an institutional level, there was an established structure to which theater studies in Flanders had to conform, if it were to gain proper recognition as a legitimate area of research. While universities thus seemed to offer the most obvious habitat for theater studies to anchor itself institutionally, this direction bolstered an artificial separation of research from practice that did not correspond to the close alliances theater scholars were keen to establish with artists.

This largely artificial separation of art theory from artistic practice was nonetheless shaken to its very core with the implementation of the 1999 Bologna Declaration, which caused a seismic shift in Europe’s academic and educational landscape. One of the most incisive aspects of the Bologna Declaration was the joint decision of a conglomerate of countries to create a so-called “European Higher Education Area” (EHEA),¹⁴ which was intended to harmonize higher education across the continent by reforming existing programs into a unified tripartite model of Bachelor-Master-Doctorate-cycles. This harmonization had to ensure the fulfilment of the three main initial objectives of the Bologna Declaration: mobility of students and researchers, comparability of degrees, and

European cooperation in quality assurance.¹⁵ Obviously, the creation of an EHEA in accordance with these principles turned out to be a forceful impetus for rethinking not only the existing programs and curricula, but also the very institutional organization of universities, including the various departments, faculties, or research groups they house. When the Bologna Declaration was implemented in Flanders in 2004-2005,¹⁶ it created an arguably unprecedented momentum for theater studies to consolidate its position and to gain visibility. While students could previously enroll for a theater studies program only after obtaining a Master's degree in another field, the Bologna reform made it possible to conquer a more autonomous space for theater studies starting from the Bachelor level and running up to a Master's degree.¹⁷

The opportunities the Bologna Declaration created for strengthening the institutional embedding of theater studies in Flemish academia contrasts sharply with the way the impact of these reforms has been perceived at the level of university colleges and vocational academies, those schools that offered primarily professional training. This segment of European higher education was impelled to implement more research-oriented programs that, because they were imposed from "above" by policy makers, caused a great deal of distress and uncertainty. The question what research could mean within a practice-based educational environment, or to what extent research is not always already a part of practicing certain professions, was hardly – if at all – addressed, neither by European nor by national governments. As a result, many institutions found themselves groping in the dark, at pains to synchronize traditional academic guidelines with the specificities of artistic research.¹⁸ Especially with regard to higher education in the arts, then, the Bologna Process arguably only exacerbated an already incipient cleavage between art and theory. The assumption that professional *academies* were forced to conform to scholarly *academia* energized the idea that both spheres work according to different sets of laws and customs, leading to a fairly schizophrenic situation in which the demarcation of research in/on/and/with art became perhaps not so much practically, but at least institutionally much more pronounced. More recently, this dismissive attitude towards the academization of higher education has been changing, but there is still a long way ahead for artistic research to become truly recognized and integrated. As American performance scholar Arthur J. Sabatini remarks, even when for some "art and performance are interdependent with research and practice," it is important to realize that "historically and in diverse institutions and discourses, this is neither self-evident nor accepted" (114).

As these issues are a topic of ongoing debates, one of the primary merits of the contributions collected here is that several of them bear direct testimony to the profound changes engendered by the Bologna Process.¹⁹ In at least partially mapping the state of the art of theater studies in Flanders, it is hardly surprising that various contributing authors refer to Bologna as a milestone in the development of the field. What is most interesting is that they take these recent changes either as a retrospective point of reference (Van den Dries; Stalpaert), or as a prospective projection of what still needs to be achieved (Gielen and Wynants). As such, they show how the state of the art continues to be in flux – on the go, as it were – in full knowledge that its contours are in large part determined by institutional conditions and governmental policies.

Intellectual Influences

Throughout this introduction, I referred a few times to the manner in which theater studies gradually broadened its disciplinary horizon, opening up the field towards other domains to redress its own methodological program. To a certain extent, however, theater studies has always been interdisciplinary in nature, insofar as interdisciplinarity furnished one of the most effective strategies for the field to conquer and eventually safeguard its place within academia. As Bart Philipsen notes in his contribution, it was more specifically the rise of theater semiotics in the 1970s and the 1980s that functioned as a crucial leverage point for theater studies to escape from the hegemony of literary studies and the previously exclusive focus on the philological analysis of drama texts. In retrospect, the striking shrewdness of this move was that theater semiotics provided an interdisciplinary bridge that connected the theatrical event (rather than the text) as a new topic of research with a methodology that literary scholars were already familiar with, bestowing on theater studies the necessary intellectual credentials to claim its own autonomy. Keir Elam, for instance, saw great promise in the cross-over between both fields, writing in his 1980 landmark study *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* that “the fortunes of the semiotic enterprise in recent years have been especially high in the field of literary studies,” whereas “the peculiar richness of theatrical communication” has yet to be recognized “as a potential area of semiotic investigation” (2).

Two decades later, however, Elam looks back on the development of theater studies in the “post’-script” to the 2002 second edition of his book. With a sense of regret, he has to admit that “the ‘semiotic moment,’ which some years ago seemed so vigorous, came to lose its cultural and academic prominence, particularly with regard to drama and performance” (191-192). The main culprit

for this demise is, in Elam's view, poststructuralism, which "came to absorb semiotic concepts in the very endeavour to 'overcome' them," even though he insists this alleged overturning never truly eradicated theater semiotics and rather led to what he calls "a closet semiotics," or a covert yet continued intention amongst scholars to approach theater and drama as a sign-system (193). Elam is definitely right in pointing the finger at poststructuralism (under which Derridean deconstruction could be ranged here as well) as one of the primary intellectual influences that undermined the semiotic belief in structural categorizations, as it inaugurated a stream of thought reveling in the freeplay of signification (Derrida) and interpretation (Eco). Poststructuralism and deconstruction had been making their way forward in philosophy from the 1960s onwards, but theater studies (as well as other domains in the humanities, such as literary studies or historiography) typically latch with a certain delay onto this type of incisive reformations of intellectual thought, with the result that it was only by the 1980s that the field was ready to shed its semiotic skin and to open up its proverbial pores to other influences. From then on, theater studies would start to exploit its true interdisciplinary orientation, as it came to embrace cultural studies, queer theory, feminism, anthropology, psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, and various other tendencies that punctuated what Dan Nadaner called in 1998 the "era of critical theory" (168).

Nonetheless, the arguably most decisive impetus for theater studies to keep its disciplinary borders malleable came from the rise of performance studies, which from the 1970s onwards was quickly growing into one of its most closely neighboring disciplines that at once strengthened and pressured theater studies' recently acquired place within academia. While the genealogical story of the development of performance studies is, just as in the case of theater studies, necessarily convoluted and complex (see, e.g., Jackson), there is no doubt that the contours of this new field have been largely defined by what Richard Schechner, generally recognized as one of its founding fathers, famously termed in 1988 the "broad spectrum approach." In his two-page article of the same title, which because of its briefness rather reads like a manifesto, Schechner postulates that:

performance – as distinct from any of its subgenres like theatre, dance, music, and performance art – is a broad spectrum of activities including at the very least the performing arts, rituals, healing, sports, popular entertainments, and performance in everyday life. ("The Broad Spectrum Approach" 4)

Deceptively simple, exactly this sentence will have a major impact on both the formation of performance studies and the continued existence of theater studies.²⁰ Schechner's call for an inclusive notion of performance that went beyond purely artistic or aesthetic practices so as to foster attention for a variety of societal and cultural events radically redefined the topical terrain that theater studies had been claiming for itself. Precisely in this sense, theater studies was challenged to maintain its own disciplinary profile while upholding its interdisciplinary orientation.

In the years that were to follow, theater studies indeed had to cope with maintaining its position in the face of this new and cutting-edge academic field called performance studies. Schechner's direct and often vehement attacks against theater definitely raised pressure on both university departments and professional practice. Dismissing "orthodox theatre" as only "a very small slice of the performance pie," Schechner firmly proclaimed in a near-legendary lecture he held in 1992 that "the new paradigm is 'performance,' not theatre," and for this reason, "theatre departments should become 'performance departments'" ("A New Paradigm" 9).²¹ The growing antagonism between theater and performance had the double-sided effect that theater scholars would either retreat within the hermetic yet imaginary confines of their own discipline, or move outward to absorb the purportedly more progressive ethos embodied by the new performance paradigm. In the midst of these insurgent changes, some scholars attempted to reconcile both seemingly oppositional tendencies. Shortly after Schechner's 1992 lecture, for instance, Jill Dolan weighed in and showed herself critical of Schechner's "suspiciously imperialist gesture" to subsume theatre into performance studies (429).²² Quite exceptionally, Dolan argued "for the retention of theatre studies as a disciplinary 'home,'" emphasizing that this base should be "deeply influenced by interdisciplinary methods" but only to facilitate the "exchange between theatre and other fields and disciplines, rather than one in which the performative evacuates theatre studies" (421).

There is a stunning correspondence between the kind of theater studies envisaged by Dolan and the manner in which this interdisciplinary discipline was evolving in Flanders around that time. Flemish theater scholars were acutely aware of the developments going on at the other side of the Atlantic, as evidenced by the invited lecture Schechner delivered in 1980 at the Center for Experimental Theater in Antwerp. As both Luk Van den Dries and Karel Vanhaesebrouck recount in their contributions, Schechner's passage in Antwerp, however brief, sparked an adventurous sense amongst a new generation of theater scholars to

explore new territories beyond the mainly semiotic and historical investigations of their predecessors. In addition, Vanhaesebrouck's insightful comparison of the development of theater studies in Flanders versus Wallonia demonstrates how both parts of the country began to diverge with regard to the influence of performance studies. As francophone scholars were mainly looking at the "études théâtrales," the French branch of the discipline, they were considerably less concerned with the changes going on across the Atlantic.

This divergence between Flemish and francophone theater scholars eventually led to different intellectual histories. As such, it is one of the main reasons why this issue primarily focuses on theater studies in the region of Flanders, rather than taking the entire country of Belgium as its geographical scope. Especially in light of the current upheaval of separationist movements – as exemplified by recent events such as the Brexit or the attempt of Catalonia to declare its independence from Spain –, the focus on Flanders immediately becomes a politically charged editorial choice, because it seems to privilege one part of the country over the other. In this respect, it is crucial to emphasize that the decision to concentrate on the development of theater studies in Flanders does not bespeak a political agenda and rather follows from the fact that there are substantial differences in how the discipline got a hold within academia on both sides of the language border that, unfortunately but undeniably so, continues to divide the country into two parts. However, instead of reinforcing the gap and lack of dialogue between Flanders and Wallonia, Vanhaesebrouck's considerate analysis might help to invigorate some of the recently renewed exchanges between the two regions that make up the country called "Belgium."

Another example that illustrates the interest of Flemish theater scholars in how the field was developing during the 1980s in the United States is the workshop in dance criticism organized by the performing arts festival Klapstuk in 1985 and for which the New York-based dance critic Deborah Jowitt was invited. At that time, Jowitt was already teaching dance criticism and dance history at the NYU Department of Performance Studies, where she could closely witness the way in which Schechner was attempting to shape the discipline.²³ Unlike the United States, however, where the rise of performance studies was nurturing institutional transformations, it must have been readily clear for theater scholars in Flanders that the newly acquired position for theater studies at their university departments and within existing curricula would leave no room for any kind of similar restructuring, let alone for renaming. It would take several more years before there was a sufficient institutional integration to establish research centers

or to redress BA and MA programs in a way that was more representative of the – indeed – broad spectrum of approaches and topics being explored in Flemish theater studies.

The present situation in Flanders reflects the major steps that have been taken since that early period of the 1970s when theater studies was at the cusp of making its entrance into Flemish academia. Currently, Flanders has three key research centers that each have an outspoken interdisciplinary profile: no longer solely focused on the performing arts as such, their activities are part of a larger, integrative approach that engages with other art forms (film, media art, literature, etc.) as well as with the corresponding theoretical domains (film studies, art theory, media archaeology, literary studies, etc.). This multifaceted perspective is well reflected in the names that were chosen for the respective centers.²⁴ At the University of Antwerp, for example, the *Research Center for Visual Poetics* (founded in 2008) pursues what it, following John Debes, calls a “visual literacy,” understood as not only the competence for identifying the aesthetic and formal composition of a work of art, but also as the ability to connect visual and other sensory experiences with critical reflection and verbal discourse (Paulus and Vanhoutte n.p.). The research group’s understanding of “poetics,” then, is grounded on the etymological root of the term, “poesis,” which means “active making.” Particular attention thus goes to the process of construction that underlies the work as well as to the historical or contemporary circumstances informing this process. Within this framework, the center conducts research on theater, film, and related artistic media, covering four areas: artist’s, intermedial, performance, and textual poetics (De Laet n.p.). The second main research unit is *S:PAM – Studies in Performing Arts & Media* (founded in 2011), which presents itself as “the research center of the Theater, Performance, Dance, and Media Studies team of Ghent University” (S:PAM n.p.). The multidisciplinary composition of the team branches off into five “research tracks,” which include: Technologies; Memories, Traumas, and Conflicts; Histories; Dramaturgies; and Practices. This topological clustering demonstrates how both ongoing and completed projects at S:PAM can no longer be structured according to disciplinary or medial categories, but rather bring forward thematic lines of inquiry that run across different areas of both theory and practice. The third and final research unit brings us to the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University Brussels),²⁵ where the *Center for Literary and Intermedial Crossings* (CLIC, founded in 2015) attracts “researchers in the field of literary, theatre and performance studies,” providing them with “an interdisciplinary network to stimulate research along three key concepts: media, genres and spaces” (CLIC

n.p.).²⁶ These concepts, however, should not be misunderstood as monolithic guiding principles, but as nexuses around which the hybridization of media, generic transgressions, and spatial multiplications all unfold.²⁷

The increased interdisciplinary repositioning at several Flemish universities of what once was “simply” just theater studies obviously also worked its way through to the level of curricula and degree titles, facilitated by the momentum for reorganization in the wake of the Bologna Declaration. At the University of Antwerp, the interdisciplinary profile of the program is reflected in the fact that it offers a Bachelor’s degree in Theater, Film, and Literary Studies, and a Master’s degree in Theater and Film Studies. At Ghent University, students are able to pursue a Bachelor and Master in Art History, Musicology, and Theater Studies with the option for a Major in Performing and Medial Arts from their second year on. The Vrije Universiteit Brussel, then, offers elective modules in Theater Studies at BA level and an additional “Profile Intermediality” at MA level. Without going into detail on the specific course modules included in these programs, it will be obvious that the activities of the correlating research centers also inform course subjects and content. This is clearly illustrated in Christel Stalpaert’s contribution in this issue, in which she traces the different forms the course module on dramaturgy has assumed mainly at Ghent University to show how the same subject has evolved alongside expanding research interests, including deeper ties between theory and practice or the relationship between art, politics, and society.

Taking Measure

In her 1988 article “Het dubbele misprijzen” (“The Double Disdain”), the Flemish dramaturg Marianne Van Kerkhoven offers a critical reflection on the field of theater studies as it was slowly taking shape in Flanders by the end of the 1980s.²⁸ Strikingly, several of her observations still resonate today, which is why I want to juxtapose a small selection of her concerns with some of the insights developed throughout this issue. While Van Kerkhoven’s claims give cause for a brief overview of the different arguments furthered by the contributing authors, they can also serve as measuring points by which we might begin to gauge where Flemish theater studies stands nowadays.

*From the angle of the exact sciences,
the humanities will therefore come less under pressure in the future.*
(Van Kerkhoven, “Het dubbele misprijzen” 51)

Taking note of the increased importance of the notion of “chaos” in the exact sciences, Van Kerkhoven speculates this might narrow the gap with the “softer” domain of the humanities, where the subjective involvement of the researcher (as interpreter, ethnographer, historian, etc.) has always made research results uncertain, hindering claims to scientific objectivity and transparency. This is clearly an optimistic view that has proven to be untenable. As Pascal Gielen and Nele Wynants discuss in their contribution, the humanities are actually more than ever under pressure of the exact sciences, which currently furnish the standard measure by which also the achievements of the humanities are judged. Precisely for this reason, Gielen and Wynants make a strong claim for safeguarding the specificity of research on (and in) the arts against what they call the “logic of quantification” that has come to predominate in academia. The problem is that what used to be known as fundamental, qualitative research is now obliged to produce results at the same quantifiable quota that are tailored to the size of the exact sciences and which simply disregard the fact that the humanities proceed according to different sets of scholarly customs.

In an attempt to open up alternative spaces for research development and assessment, Gielen and Wynants ask what the humanities could learn not so much from the exact sciences, but from the emerging field of artistic research. Withstanding the predominant tendency to model the requirements for artistic research on the conventional standards prevalent in academia, they turn things around by probing what the former has to offer to the latter. In doing so, they argue for a reevaluation of the performative as well as the imaginative dimensions of classic scholarly research. One of the lessons they take from doing research *in* the arts is that it “not only strives to consciously observe reality as it is, it is also a process of performatively *making* a (new) reality.” This quality to actually intervene in the world is what academic research *on* the arts is risking to lose in a system in which sheer numbers (of publications, citations, funding, etc.) are fetishized at the expense of having a genuine impact on culture and society. Pushing this further, Gielen and Wynants also discuss how the central role for imagination in artistic research has a real epistemological value. This insight leads them to call for a widening of the range of formats currently valorized by academic criteria and to explore more adventurous ways of disseminating research results beyond the confines of conventional scholarly circles.

Interestingly, the notion of performativity also recurs as a central hinge in Bart Philipsen’s reconsideration of the tensed relationship between theater studies and literary studies. Placing both disciplines side by side, he comes to the conclusion

that a renewed shared ground might be furnished by the mutual acknowledgment that both text and theater have performativity at their base. Such a claim does not simply rehearse some of the basic tenets that performance studies has proffered already a long while ago. On the contrary, it goes directly against the anti-textual bias that lingers in performance studies, urging instead for the recognition that not only the embodied enactment of a text, but also the text in itself is a performative act that follows from an author's embodied commitment to a certain topic or theme and which, in turn, calls for readers to engage with it. Philipsen's article aims to flesh out precisely this connection between textuality and performativity, as he searches for the common denominator that links together two disciplines whose relationship has been strained for many years. In extension, just as Gielen and Wynants take their cue from artists doing research, so too does Philipsen find in literary authors doing performance an inspiring example for scholars to go beyond traditional means of presenting research results and to develop other, more performative formats that might enhance the vigorous impact of their findings. The question that remains, of course, is what forms these forms could take exactly *and* how they could be academically valorized beyond the now standardized rankings of A1-journals and citation numbers.

Someone who studies theater studies may go to watch finished performances, but has little or no knowledge of the "chemical reactions" needed to create a performance, because – except for a few exceptions – there is little attention paid to the practical creative process within the program.
(Van Kerkhoven, "Het dubbele misprijzen" 52)

The question of how to integrate practice within a theoretically oriented theater studies program continues to be a pressing issue up until today, but there is no doubt that a lot has changed since Van Kerkhoven expressed her concern about the familiarity of theater scholars with the "chemistry" of creative processes. Christel Stalpaert's article on dramaturgy in the university curriculum is indicative of the myriad ways in which theory and practice have been converging. She discusses, for example, how she introduced at Ghent University the format of "dramaturgical sessions," which were aimed precisely at driving students out of the classroom and into the rehearsal studio through ad hoc collaborations with performing arts venues and artists. In terms of research, Stalpaert also points out how the academization of higher education after Bologna gave rise to a new type of dramaturg: in addition to the "researcher-as-dramaturg" (or, the theater scholar who also takes up dramaturgical jobs), the reverse profile of the

“dramaturg-as-researcher” began to emerge, with dramaturgs committing themselves more fully to research by pursuing a PhD in the Arts. At the same time, neither theory nor art should lock themselves up in the safe orbit of their own cocoon, which is why Stalpaert draws on Marianne Van Kerkhoven’s own distinction between a “micro-dramaturgy” of creative processes and the “macro-dramaturgy” of the social realm to argue for an increased investment in the ethical “response-ability” of scholars, artists, dramaturgs, or anyone else involved in the arts. It is necessary for the arts, Stalpaert claims, to be responsive to as well as to take up responsibility for the exigencies and challenges posed by the neoliberal times in which we currently live and which increasingly put the very production of art and research under pressure.

In his historical overview of the rise of theater studies in Flanders, Luk Van den Dries takes a rather retrospective look, but he too pays particular attention to the imbrication of theory and practice. His discussion shows how pioneering scholars had to navigate between their intention to introduce theater studies in an academic environment and their passionate interest in the art of theater. Sketching a vivid picture of the major stepping stones during this foundational period, Van den Dries elucidates how theater practice was actually never that far removed from scholarly research, even in the midst of the institutional struggle to find recognition for theater studies as an academic discipline. However, as one of the primary witnesses of this struggle, Van den Dries is well aware of the precarious nature of these achievements. The fight has not been fought yet, he maintains, and he cautions against the “anxious uncertainty” that still threatens the position of theater studies at Flemish universities. It is a warning that deserves attention, since despite the progress that has been made in terms of the institutional embedding of theater studies, the field is still young and extremely vulnerable, not the least in light of ongoing financial cutbacks.

Providing a much-needed complement to Van den Dries’s contribution, Karel Vanhaesebrouck juxtaposes the development of theater studies in Flanders with the rise of the discipline in Wallonia. This kind of comparative approach that couples Flanders to Wallonia is fairly unprecedented, as Flanders is more often measured against the Netherlands when it comes to theater and the performing arts, obviously because of the direct affinities with regard to language. But the effort to cross the language border and to trace how theater studies has been developing along different lines on each side of it proves to be particularly illuminating. Above all, it shows how even in adjacent regions belonging to the same country, there can be substantial differences when it comes to prevailing

intellectual traditions and artistic tendencies. However, instead of positioning these divergences as sources for possible misunderstandings or flawed perceptions, Vanhaesebrouck values them as potential grounds for exchange and dialogue. “Artists and scholars from both cultural sides,” he argues, “can learn from one another not because they have to become similar, but because they are different.”

*However, there are some evolutions that can speed up
a possible change in mentality of practice with regard to theory.
Innovative theater practice itself contains, more than ever, a reflexive dimension.
The theater of today theorizes its own practice
(Van Kerkhoven, “Het dubbele misprijzen” 52)*

The increased self-reflective awareness that Van Kerkhoven begins to discern in the theater of the 1980s has only amplified during the decennia that were to follow. The very title of Naomi Velissariou’s article in this issue, “My Metadrama,” already points in this direction. In her contribution, Velissariou discusses from her perspective as an upcoming theater maker with mixed roots in Greece and Belgium but currently based in Amsterdam, the different functions that language fulfills in her artistic practice. Differentiating between *jargon* (as the terminology used to talk about art in policy and funding), *language* (as the “means to make thoughts and feelings known”), and *discourse* (as the more profound dialogue on art between artists, scholars, and society at large), Velissariou elucidates how she uses different types of terminologies, phrasings, or formats for the various aspects that comprise her work as a theater maker, which includes writing funding applications, doing research, creating new theater texts, training and rehearsing with actors, as well as theorizing and critically reflecting on her practice. Covering the major stages of the trajectory she goes through for different projects, Velissariou demonstrates how she sagaciously bends language to her own will and in service of these various purposes.

Velissariou’s conscious intention to turn linguistic expression into a strategic instrument to advance her artistic practice already underlines the importance of the reflective side to virtually every aspect of her work. But a similar kind of self-consciousness is already inherent in her view on theater today. For Velissariou, “reality now is already theatricalized, even before we can make theater of it.” It is, however, not so much this omnipresent theatricalization of everyday life that Velissariou aims to expose, as she rather wants to aggravate this *condition humaine* by showing characters who suffer from an “excessive self-awareness,”

that is, from the ability to analyze their own condition paired with the knowledge they will never be able to step out of it. In other words, it is the character's ability to see the theatrical construction rather than being trapped in it that furnishes the grounds for the perplexing and piercing mix of tragic depth and playful distance that typifies much of Velissariou's work. Confronted with this so-called "metadrama," then, spectators are provoked to reflect on their own enmeshment in everyday life's theater.

Next to theater, contemporary dance too has been showing a heightened self-reflective dimension through explorations of the conditions that constitute both "doing dance" and "watching dance," leading to a subfield that Rudi Laermans has called "reflexive dance" ("Dance in General" 413). Choreographers like Jérôme Bel, Boris Charmatz, or Xavier Le Roy present their work as artistic inquiries into the (inter-)medial particularities of choreography, pursuing a kind of research that obviously feeds back into dance studies and the primarily discursive theorization of dance as an art form. But the reverse movement has likewise been gaining prominence, with many contemporary choreographers using theory and critical thought as sources of inspiration to feed forward into their choreographic practice. This openness towards theory comes to the fore in Katie Vickers and Albert Quesada's contribution in this issue. Choosing the format of a "self-interview," Vickers and Quesada interrogate each other in an attempt to find out what role discursive thinking as well as writing play in their artistic practice. For them, theory is not limited to dance studies as such, as their interests reach much further and also include studies on perception, music, politics, literature, etc. While the function of theoretical discourse is slightly different for both choreographers, they agree on the fact that "the sensual asks for sensing and thinking to go together." This is an important claim, since it goes against the long-standing association of dance with sheer bodily movement that is either devoid of meaning or incapable of producing knowledge. To state, on the other hand, that dance solicits both thinking and feeling (on the side of performers as well as spectators) refigures the dancing body as a mediator of not only sensations but also of specific types of embodied knowledge.

*Within a general policy with regard to education in the arts, however,
there should be room for these two types of approach:
for the passing on of traditional values
and for the pedagogical translation of innovative impulses.
(Van Kerkhoven, "Het dubbele misprijzen" 52)*

The need for a balance between tradition and innovation in educating artists, which Van Kerkhoven is advocating here, is a matter that also turns up throughout this issue. Karel Vanhaesebrouck, for example, observes how the performing arts scene in Wallonia is currently witnessing a “wave of renewal” with younger generations of theater artists reacting against the pervasive legacies of psychological realism or rhetorical acting that for many years have been prevalent in francophone theater. Alternatively, they are seeking for new ways to reignite both the poetical and political potential of the performing arts by creating more inventive and challenging forms of contemporary theater. Without wanting to trace this development back to one single cause, Vanhaesebrouck does point out how the actors’ training at the Drama Department at the Royal Conservatory in Liège has played an important role in this. The focus of this program on research as well as on the position of theater in society and culture at large seems to have contributed to a greater awareness amongst artists that theater can entail more than the mere declamation of a given text.

Remarkably, it is this distancing from more classical traditions in theater that appears to push these younger generations of theater artists in Wallonia into the direction of what has by now become another sort of “tradition”: the so-called “Flemish Wave” and its proclaimed legacy of innovating the performing arts. Vanhaesebrouck refers to the work of Raoul Collectif as an example of how a francophone theater troupe ties in with the specific acting style furthered by the Flemish collective Tg STAN by the end of the 1980s. By placing primacy on the “now” of performance, both groups share the intention to go against the “as if” of acting, or the idea that actors should fully embody their role in service of a fictional story. Instead, the impulse for their acting comes from the event of performance, from how a given staging unfolds during a specific evening, which means that certain parts of a piece might be done differently in terms of speech, action, or order depending on the specific circumstances in which it is staged. However, Vanhaesebrouck also emphasizes that “the aim of Raoul Collectif is not to imitate a particular acting style,” as they rather share with Tg STAN “a keen interest in research.” This research starts in rehearsals but continues on stage, which for both groups provides a playground to juggle around with spontaneous intuitions and self-reflective side-comments.

While a troupe like Raoul Collectif seeks connection with precursors like Tg STAN, other upcoming theater artists feel the need to make the opposite move and to distance themselves from the looming weight of the legacy of the “Flemish Wave.” Naomi Velissariou clearly gives voice to this position: while she explains

how the acting method she developed might use “similar means” as influential theater collectives such as Maatschappij Discordia, ‘t Barre Land, or Tg STAN, she emphatically states that she adopts these means to entirely “opposite goals.” The common ground is that Velissariou wants her actors to actually think what they say at the moment when they are saying their text. This comes indeed close to the legacy represented by the collectives just mentioned above and to which Velissariou was exposed when she studied with Dora van der Groen at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp.²⁹ Van der Groen’s drama class became renowned for training actors to speak with their “own” voice and to develop a sort of “thinking-talking” that comes forth out of the specific situation of the performance rather than from what was rehearsed. According to this ethos, actors are expected to be in the “now” of the piece and only then their true personality as a human being and as an individual artist could come to the fore. It is exactly this emphasis on the authenticity of both the present moment and the actor’s subjectivity that Velissariou diametrically opposes. Because for her, “reality itself is now dominated by the fictional,” theater should be dealing with this generalized theatricality, rather than harking back to what might have become obsolete notions, such as “authenticity” and “realness.” Appropriating parts of the theatrical tradition in which she was first immersed, Velissariou revises its underlying assumptions in light of the exigencies and hallmarks of our own contemporary time. As such, her work emerges out of the perennial dialectic between tradition and innovation that is perhaps the most powerful driving force behind theater and art in general.

Coda

This issue was scheduled for publication in 2017 but, due to unforeseen circumstances, it only appeared in the second half of 2018. More than a year of delay is quite ironic for a special issue that proclaims to offer a “state of the art,” even when – as I explained at length at the outset of this introduction – the term is used here in a somewhat broader sense than its more common meaning as the most recent stage in the development of ideas, knowledge, technologies, or science in general. Placed between quotation marks, the “state of the art” as reflected upon throughout these pages also wants to comment on the sometimes devastating demand for groundbreaking and cutting-edge innovations, which may be more applicable to the exact sciences than to the humanities. Such a demand not only sets a certain kind of tone for scholarly discourse, but it also puts the advancement of knowledge under excruciating pressure. This becomes particularly acute when one’s position at the vanguard of academic research is

primarily determined by quantifiable numbers of publications and successful funding applications.

One of the most obvious indications that productivity is taking the upper hand over qualitative content is that the amount of time scholars can spend working on (and, more importantly, reworking) their writings is drastically shrinking. The fact that this issue took so long to germinate testifies to this hard-pressed situation while, conversely, it also shows how *time* is crucial for academic research to develop, both in the humanities and other domains. Whether it concerns time to collect and to analyze data and to derive meaningful conclusions from them; or time to read, to consult archival documents, or to engage deeply with critical thought, one fact is certain: new insights are not born overnight. This all might sound rather lame or flimsy, and even apologetic in terms of the delayed publication of this issue, but the reality is that committed scholars are experiencing difficult times in fulfilling their commitments. It is not a coincidence that a group of Berlin scientists published in 2010 *The Slow Science Manifesto* in which they unequivocally state:

We do need time to think. We do need time to digest. We do need time to misunderstand each other, especially when fostering lost dialogue between humanities and natural sciences. We cannot continuously tell you what our science means; what it will be good for; because we simply don't know yet. Science needs time. (Slow Science Academy 1)³⁰

The call for slowing down has begun to resound increasingly louder and not only in scholarship and science. As epitomized by the so-called Slow Movement, it also manifests itself in various other aspects of our lives, cultures, and societies. As long as we carry with us the weight of the modernist idea of continual progress, we are bound to carry on towards an infinite horizon that is at risk of remaining forever out of reach. Various authors in this issue accordingly express their worry for an academic climate governed by the expeditious rhythm of hasty output at the expense of time to think, to reflect, and to imagine other ways of doing research.

Perhaps the greatest value of this issue, then, lies in the manner in which the contributing authors take the overarching theme of a “state of the art” as an invitation to look not only at the historical and contemporary formations of the field of theater studies in Flanders, but also to anticipate its potential future. Remarkable in this respect is that, rather than slowness, it is the reevaluation of the

performative impact of research, the connection between art and society, as well as the scholar's creative imagination that stands out in these modest yet cogent calls for rethinking the current tenets of scholarship. This leads to yet another irony in the context of this issue: despite being firmly situated in the domain of the "soft" humanities, the emphasis placed on the performativity of research and on the importance of imaginative thinking brings the "state of the art" depicted in this issue closer to the predicaments of the creative industries that increasingly dominate Western post-industrial and neoliberal societies. Whether this convergence may help the humanities in general and theater studies in particular to restore their value in the face of economic stakes and immediate societal relevance remains to be seen. Likewise, the usurpation of qualities such as performativity or imagination for corporate and political purposes will continue to be, as ever, a lingering risk that easily slips into feeding the vertiginous cycle of continual progress. Issues like these will become ever more important and can be expected to take up a central role in any next effort to construe and/or account for a "state of the art" of theater studies, both in and beyond the local region of Flanders.

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⁷ All translations from Dutch are my own. Marianne Van Kerkhoven opens her early 1987 survey of the so-called “Flemish Wave” with the observation that “for already a while, there is talk in the Netherlands about a ‘Flemish Wave’ in the theater” (2). This not only indicates that the origins of the label are in fact Dutch, but it once again begs the question as to how Flemish the “Flemish Wave” actually was and how this overarching term nationalizes what was in reality a heterogeneous and internationally oriented artistic development. As a matter of fact, Van Kerkhoven explains that one of the reasons why the provenance of the “Flemish Wave” lies in the Netherlands is that, by the end of the 1980s, many Flemish theater artists were showing much of their work there because of the lack of institutional and governmental support in their own country.

⁸ Crombez also shows in his discussion how the performing arts magazine *Etcetera*, which had its first issue in 1983, played an important role in the formation of a canon of “Flemish Wave” theater artists, even if the magazine was critical of the label. Conducting a “frequency analysis” that measured the number of times certain artists were mentioned in *Etcetera* (with others being left out), Crombez’ research demonstrates how the magazine contributed to the establishment of a selective group of so-called pioneers of experimental Flemish theater, dance, and performance.

⁹ I should draw attention to the decidedly theatrical vocabulary Foucault uses to theorize the difference between history’s penchant for “Ursprung” versus genealogy’s concern with “Herkunft” and “Entstehung.” Further on in the same passage I have been quoting from, he writes: “Emergence is thus the entry of forces; it is their eruption, the leap from the wings *to center stage*, each in its youthful strength” (149-150; italics added). And he goes on to claim that, “In a sense, only *a single drama is ever staged* in this ‘non-place,’ the endlessly repeated *play of dominations*” (150; italics added). Even his mere choice of terms affirms how Foucault is a philosopher of/for theater and performance.

¹⁰ As mentioned, the performing arts magazine *Etcetera* had its first issue in 1983. While it initially functioned as an important catalyst for the Flemish performing arts scene, it eventually grew into one of the primary archival resources for tracing the developments within the scene during those foundational and also later years. The articles in these early issues keep remarkably close track of some of the most significant changes going on at that time, in Flanders as well as abroad. The journal *Documenta*, to which this present issue also belongs, takes up a slightly different position in this history: it grew out of the Bulletin of the Documentation Center for Drama Research at Ghent University, which – also in 1983 – expanded into a proper journal for theater. In a brief item for *Etcetera*, Marianne Van Kerkhoven highlights the appearance of *Documenta*, noting that even though she is not entirely convinced by the quality of all contributions, “*Documenta* has its significance in the possible establishment of theater studies in Flanders,” as it is “a welcome expression” of a “first diversification” whereby “each publication has its own function” (“*Documenta 1 en 2*” 52). As Karel Vanhaesebrouck discusses in this issue, the situation in Wallonia differs slightly from the one in Flanders, since francophone theater scholars were, in contrast to their Flemish colleagues, less inclined to contribute to publications outside the academic circuit, such as *Alternatives théâtrales*, while they also seemed to keep a greater distance from what was happening in the performing arts scene. In recent years, however, this balance between theory and practice became restored with greater interactions between scholars, artists, and a variety of publication outlets. For more on the role of theater journals in the Flemish performing arts scene, see Crois et al.

¹¹ For more on the emergence of an alternative performing arts venue circuit in Flanders, see De Vuyst, *Alles is Rustig*. For an insightful critique on this book, see Laermans, “Succes als trauma?”

¹² In her overview of the development of theater studies, Chiara Maria Buglioni remarks that “critiques of theater semiotics have always involved the process of transferring linguistic terms and metaphors to theater – which is a polyphonic system, not merely a verbal phenomenon – and the oversystematization of its concepts” (2014, 319).

¹³ A standard work mapping some of the different interdisciplinary approaches within theater and performance studies is still Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach’s *Critical Theory and Performance*. For a more introductory overview, see Mark Fortier’s *Theory/Theatre* (2002).

¹⁴ The Bologna Process began in 1998 when the Sorbonne Declaration was signed by the four initiating countries (France, Germany, Italy, and the UK). One year later, the actual Bologna Declaration was signed by 30 countries committing to implement the necessary reforms for the establishment and harmonization of the European Higher Education Area. See <http://www.ehea.info/pid34248/history.html> (Accessed 21 June 2018).

¹⁵ In subsequent “Communiqués” published after the Ministerial Conferences (which since the signing of the Bologna Declaration are organized every two years), the initial objectives have been refined and complemented. In addition, the European Commission publishes also more extensive Implementation Reports, with the latest one dating from 2018. For another (external) evaluation, see “Bologna Objectives and their Fulfillment,” in Sin et al. 83-99.

¹⁶ The reforms were stipulated in the “Decree of 4 April 2003 concerning the restructuring of higher education in Flanders.” See <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=13425> (Accessed 21 June 2018).

¹⁷ For an overview of the theater studies programs in both Flanders and the Netherlands after the Bologna reforms, see Vercauteren.

¹⁸ Not surprisingly, shortly after the implementation of Bologna objectives in Flanders, various publications appeared with critical reflections on the academization of Flemish higher education. See, for instance, the 2006 issue of the art journal *De Witte Raaf* on “Kunst en Onderzoek” (“Art and Research”); Tindemans; Van Dyck. For a critique in English, see Dieter Lesage’s 2009 article “The Academy is Back: On Education, the Bologna Process, and the Doctorate in the Arts.” For slightly more recent discussions, also in English, of the various developments in artistic research in the Netherlands and Flanders, see Janneke Wesseling’s 2011 edited collection *See it Again, Say it Again: The Artist as Researcher*.

¹⁹ As various authors gauge the impact of the Bologna Declaration on higher education in theater studies in Flanders, this issue continues the discussions offered in Vanhaesebrouck as well as Bleeker et al.

²⁰ Schechner’s willfully open delineation of the field will be echoed various times after him. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, for instance, opens her 2004 text “Performance Studies” with the following statement: “The field of Performance Studies takes performance as an organizing concept for the study of a wide range of behavior. A *postdiscipline of inclusions*, Performance Studies sets no limit on what can be studied in terms of medium and culture. Nor does it limit the range of approaches that can be taken” (43, italics added).

²¹ Schechner first voiced these claims at a keynote panel of the national conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), held in August 1992 in Atlanta. His lecture was later published as a “Comment” in *TDR*, which is also the version from which I am quoting here.

²² I am quoting here from Jill Dolan’s 1993 article “Geographies of Learning” published in *Theatre Journal*, which she later expanded in Chapter 4 of her 2001 book of the same title. In *Professing Performance*, Shannon Jackson similarly develops a critical reflection on the oppositional relationship between theater and performance.

²³ On the occasion of the workshop, Jowitt was interviewed by the Flemish magazine *Etcetera* (see Deputter and Opsomer).

²⁴ For an overview of the research centers devoted to the performing arts in Wallonia, see Karel Vanhaesebrouck’s contribution in this issue.

²⁵ The Vrije Universiteit Brussel discourages the use of the English translation of its name in order to avoid confusion with the francophone Université Libre de Bruxelles, which would translate in the exact same manner.

²⁶ To be entirely accurate, I should point out that CLIC was actually renamed as the Center for Literary and Intermedial Crossings in 2015, which is the latest in a series of transformations of a research center that was already founded in the early 1970s.

²⁷ It should be noted that what I am leaving out of my discussion here are the various research groups of which the mentioned centers are often founding or participating members, together with other research units of both national and international universities. As such, these research groups mainly constitute collaborative networks across different universities rather than being tied to one specific institution.

²⁸ Van Kerkhoven's article is a contemplation that accompanies the more descriptive report on the different theater studies programs at Flemish universities published in that same 1988 issue (De Vuyst). Both texts are part of a larger series that was spread over several *Etcetera* issues and was called "Dossier Opleiding" ("Dossier Education"). The aim of the series was to provide an overview of what Flanders had to offer in terms of education (higher, professional, amateur) in or on theater.

²⁹ It would be hard to overestimate the formative influence Dora van der Groen (1927-2015) had on theater practice in Flanders. After studying drama with, among others, Herman Teirlinck in the late 1950s, van der Groen worked for theater and television, but she would find her true vocation in pedagogy and actor's training. For more than three decades (1978-2009), van der Groen was director of the drama class at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp, where she educated several generations of actors and directors (such as Luk Perceval, Ivo van Hove, Sara de Roo, etc.) who currently still play a leading role in the performing arts scene, both in Flanders and abroad.

³⁰ For an insightful and critical expansion of *The Slow Science Manifesto*, see Stengers.