

# Anyone: (A) History?

-- Natalie Gielen

Ten years ago, the artists Juan Dominguez, Mette Edvardsen, Alma Söderberg and Sarah Vanhee started dreaming about a way of organizing their artistic practices differently. In 2015 their artist-run structure Anyone started as a subsidized organization. Now it no longer exists. Why does an artistic organization come to an end? What lessons can we draw from its existence? What traces does it leave?

## Perspectives

The artist-run organization Anyone no longer exists. But what remains?

I am not merely asking these questions from an objective journalistic perspective. I am writing this text as a cultural worker who has always been interested in alternative ways of (self-)organizing, as an art critic, and as a co-initiator and former employee of Anyone.

Together with artists Juan Dominguez, Mette Edvardsen, Alma Söderberg, and Sarah Vanhee, I started dreaming, thinking, and talking about Anyone in 2013. The artists had asked me to work for them as the structure's coordinator, supporting each of them in the organization of their artistic practices. In 2015 Anyone received structural funding for two years and I was hired full-time. Only a few months later, the artists and I had to start writing a new dossier for funding for 2017–21. We had no other option, because from then on you could only apply for structural funding in Flanders every five years instead of two. This meant, as it does for all small organizations, more pressure to apply for subsidies and a lot of extra work. For Anyone this also meant planning for the longer-term future even though we were just getting started, while also starting to

work out how Manyone could function. It put a lot of pressure on our organization, but we received the structural funding. Manyone was lucky, but at the same time, we did not receive the requested budget amount – lucky but struggling. I left the structure in the summer of 2016 but kept following the company from a distance over the years. When the artists asked me to write a text about the traces Manyone has left behind, I felt we had come full circle. Our reflection on what an artistic structure can be continues, although the context has changed: from dreaming and planning, to working and trying to make it work, to reflecting on what Manyone has meant and still means.

Manyone has held many perspectives as a structure, and so does this text: I'm combining my own reflections with those of the four artists and board members Helga Duchamps and Steven Op de Beeck, and Eva Wilsens, who coordinated Manyone from 2017 to 2023. And of course, there's your perspective, dear reader. What do you make of this history? How do you organize your work? How can we learn from each other?

## **One body of work**

If we consider an organization to be a functioning system, we might as well consider it a body: pumping blood through all the parts, making them pulse, contract, digest, think, and speak. Manyone: a body of work of four artists, supported by a coordinator. Quite a unique body, carrying five hearts within it.

**Juan:** “I missed a sense of community, having people around you who care about you. Having a structure is very empowering. The commitment was very strong. The principles and the ethics were very good: against isolation and individualism, against a market-driven way of working. Also, the idea of something different, not sharing a brand but a structure, like a scaffold”.

When Manyone first came to life, five hearts were beating for the same ideas and principles. Five people came together to experiment with a different way of organizing the work of four artists.

**Mette:** “I needed something practical and, at the same time, I wanted to maintain my integrity and freedom”.

In my conversations with Juan, Mette, Alma, and Sarah, they each expressed their enthusiasm for the ideas underlying *Manyone*. We wanted to make a difference with the way management bureaus were then working—starting from a group of artists instead of the artists being selected by a pre-existing bureaus. We didn’t want to take a percentage from the income of sales and touring—the business model for most artist-run and driven organizations—because then we would fall into a production-driven logic in which more sales means more income. We wanted to build a structure that arose from the needs of the artists themselves without building a company structure around one individual artist. For some, like Berlin-based Juan, who was working more and more in Brussels, and Alma, who had just moved to the city, it was also a chance to further connect with the international community of artists living there. But what was in it for the person who had to coordinate this structure, to support four artists in their work, and to run the organization on a daily basis?

**Eva:** “I found the idea of working with a small structure and four artists interesting, a nice experiment. And I had a good connection with the artists”.

Eva’s words echo my own enthusiasm when I started to coordinate *Manyone*. I felt a close affinity with the artists and their practices, and I really liked the idea of experimenting with a different way of (self-)organizing. I collaborated closely with the artists and got to know their way of thinking and working, learned the needs of their artistic practices, worked with diverse, hybrid art forms that were often resistant to a routine way of producing and distributing. What’s not to like about that?

From my previous work experience, I also enjoyed the steep learning curve that comes with working for a very small organization, and I was looking forward to expanding my professional skills.

## **Togetherness**

**Juan:** “There was the excitement of a new beginning, of finally belonging, of building something together”.

Manyone started out with a strong sense of “togetherness”, as Juan puts it, and great integrity. The artists emphasize how much they appreciated the strengthening aspect of mutual solidarity, belonging to a community instead of being alone with the work, and the exchanges that took place among them.

**Sarah:** “It’s a privilege to look into someone’s daily creative life and to learn from that”.

As a coordinator, I felt motivated by, as Sarah puts it, “the dedication to the work and one another”. Together, we were learning by doing the work.

**Mette:** “There’s a place to go to”.

Manyone had an office space that we shared with other artist-run organizations. There, the coordinator met with the artists individually to talk about the work. Juan enjoyed working with one person and building something together over time instead of having to explain his artistic vision and way of working again and again to somebody new.

Most of the time I was alone in our office, but the moments when all five of us met were crucial. We also gathered outside the office, in the living rooms and at the kitchen tables of the artists based in Brussels: Alma, Sarah and Mette. The essence of Manyone not only lay in the individual talks between the coordinator and the artists, or in the office hours during which the coordinator carried out tasks for the artists. The structure felt most alive during the conversations we had together, creating a vibrant space of dialogue where the work could be shared.

## An ongoing sharing

**Eva:** “Doing production work brought me closer to the artists and their universe. It’s important if you spend a lot of time alone behind your laptop”.

For me, as a coordinator, these in-person conversations motivated me to discuss the ethics and Manyone’s way of working. I also agree with Eva when she stresses the importance of doing production work and occasionally travelling with the artists. It is a direct way of learning more about the artists’ daily artistic practices, their way of working and thinking, and their needs.

**Juan:** “Sometimes I felt like we needed to excuse ourselves from the board, but I liked it very much: they questioned the budget, our ideas, etc.”.

Manyone was blessed with a small, highly committed board. For the artists, this was something new since they previously hadn’t been part of such a structure. The board acted as a critical sounding board. For a small organization, having the support of a group of people who listen carefully is very precious. These were people who challenged the ideas that are on the table, who proposed new ways of thinking and operating, and who were there when needed.

**Steven:** “I don’t know if the artists realized that I wasn’t just ‘helping out’ as a board member. I found Manyone truly inspiring. Especially in the beginning, when the structure was defining itself. I felt something new was happening”.

Although Manyone wanted to operate as a flexible scaffold structure and not a brand, we started organizing live presentations with art organization Viernulvier at De Vooruit (Ghent), Buda (Kortrijk), Museo Reina Sofía (Madrid), and Skogen (Göteborg). During these events, the four artistic practices and some of the conversations between the artists were shared with an audience. “Putting our practices together felt relevant, it was clear that they were related somehow”, says Juan. The public moments were an interesting exercise in maintaining the artistic and organizational integrity of Manyone, because it opened it up to an audience. The artists curated

their own works, which was a nice opportunity to test things out. Simultaneously, a lot of time and effort was put into clearly communicating the needs of the artists to the collaborators at organizing institutions: resisting the branding of Manyone in communication, emphasizing the different artistic practices while creating a space in which the affinities could organically become visible to audiences. Those common presentations were also an opportunity to present some of the small experiments the artists were exploring within Manyone, particularly as the original focus was not supposed to be on the production of big projects. “There was an agility, an organic approach to the artistic process”, says Sarah about some of the works made possible by Manyone.

The basis for sharing the work was, as Alma puts it, trust.

**Alma:** “There was trust from the people in Manyone towards my work. In other kinds of organizations, it’s not necessarily a matter of trust, but of “Will this be good enough?” I think Manyone helped me to cultivate this idea of trust in my work”.

## How to keep five hearts beating

And yet ...

**Alma:** “Instead of lightening the workload, Manyone was making it heavier. Having an organization takes energy and time. We underestimated that”.

As a coordinator, I felt perpetually inadequate. Not because I was unqualified for the job, but because I could never be enough, never fulfil the four artists’ very specific and diverse needs. If I focused on one or two artistic projects, there were several others I couldn’t devote the same amount of energy to simultaneously. For our subsidizers, we listed the work that Manyone could potentially carry out for the four artists. This list went on and on, showing the incredible potential of the structure. However, there was a huge workload, and a coordinator only has two hands and a certain amount of time (although I often worked far more than the hours I was paid

for). The coordinator's tasks included: financial management of the structure and project budgets, managing dossiers and reports for the structure and for different projects or development trajectories, preparing board meetings, representing the organization within the professional field, taking care of the mountains of paperwork that come with a legally established not-for-profit association (vzw) in Belgium and with funding by the Flemish Government, planning and production work for the artists, booking travel and accommodation, meetings with the artists, and much more.

**Alma:** “There was sometimes confusion among our artists: who attended board meetings, who went to meetings with the arts council, etc. This involved some negotiation as to what the artists did, and how much responsibility we assumed. This could be a source of comfort or imbalance”.

The artists had to attend meetings, to discuss the activities of *Man-yone*, the planning, ethics, and common issues, but they also had to meet individually with the coordinator to discuss their artistic plans, needs, dossiers, budgets, etc. Then, of course, there were a lot of meetings to discuss dossiers, reports, board meetings, etc. An artist-run organization, inevitably and by definition, demands a lot of time from the artists. Sometimes, there was also an imbalance there as some of the artists spent more time in Brussels and were therefore more available. Also, only one of the artists spoke Dutch and was thus the only one able to comment on certain texts or attend certain meetings. And then some of the artists had more financial stability and able to spend more time on *Man-yone* than others—even though there was a strong sense of responsibility and togetherness.

**Mette:** “As a group, you are responsible for the group. It's not about distributing time and effort equally, but about taking care of that time and that responsibility”.

As a group, we were responsible for a lot of administrative and artistic needs without having the means (and thus paid hours!) to fulfil them all. It is important to note within the local context that the administrative workload for small organizations funded by the Flemish Arts Decree is huge.

**Helga:** “You spend so much time on dossiers and administration that there’s not enough time for the essence of the work. This is something that often comes back in informal conversations with cultural workers from other artist-run organizations”.

There is no difference in the administrative requirements for small and big institutions, creating an imbalance between the work that supports the artists and the work that supports the organization itself. Another time-consuming aspect of *Manyone* was what could be called the downside of an upside: the flexibility of a scaffold structure that is, as Sarah puts it, “a mouldable thing with an empty centre”. When formulated like that, it sounds less like a positive quality. Instead it seems to underline the lack of a firm basis. Without such a basis, the work method needs to be discussed over and over again, which is problematic when there is never enough time to come together for in-depth conversations.

## Checks and (im)balances

There was a sense of imbalance in *Manyone* that grew stronger over time: between the ambitions and the means, the lightening of the workload versus the workload growing heavier, between the work being done for some artists and consequently not for others, between the project-driven reality and the development focus of *Manyone*, between artists living in and outside Belgium, and between the artists’ unpaid work and the coordinator’s paid position.

**Sarah:** “In smaller and artist-run organizations, the difference between the “work” and a paid “job” is often unclear. In that sense, working with a bigger organization can sometimes be a relief, as I can also think of my work as a job. In organizations like *Manyone*, there is simply too much work for the job frame. There’s also very little reward in the work the cultural worker does, because that person also wants to grow”.

The artists didn’t feel less overworked, they weren’t compensated for the work put into the structure, and sometimes they weren’t



even better supported in their work. As a paid coordinator, I felt enormously overworked. Most of the time I was alone behind a desk, unable to fulfil the needs of the artists because of the immense workload. As the only paid worker I felt lonely and perpetually guilty because of the discrepancy between my paid job and the lack of remuneration for the artists. Because of this guilt, I found it hard to set boundaries within my job. This led to frustrations, and not only on my part. What did the artists get out of Manyone as unpaid and overworked members of an organizational structure? What did I get out of Manyone as a paid but overworked coordinator?

As time went by, Manyone was never enough for any of us—or always too much for all of us. Because of a small financial reserve built up over the years, my successor Eva could employ herself on a 4/5 basis and briefly hire a part-time assistant: Cillian O’Neill helped her with productional work and the time-consuming work of booking travel and accommodation. But even with that help, Manyone could not fulfil the needs of the artists. This wasn’t because we were overreaching our ambitions, as Mette emphasizes, we always knew that our potential to-do list was, as is often the case, too long. “We were aware of the fact that not all our needs could be taken care of by Manyone. A to-do list is there to lay the foundations”, Mette explains, “but then you need to prioritize what you want to do with the available resources”. This is not a story about artists without limits, but a story of too few financial means.

**Eva:** “Back then, I was angry with the subsidizers: how could we do the work with the given amount? We should have become a bigger structure with more employees and a substantial amount of funding”.

Everyone involved agrees that Manyone could have worked with more funding. The coordinator could have been supported by another paid colleague and by a fixed network of freelancers, so that more work could be done properly. That way the never-ceasing demands of projects (and production) could have gone hand in hand with the actual focus of Manyone: development. And of course, the artists could then be paid for the work they put into the structure. Not all properly functioning artist-run organizations put their artists on the payroll, but I think this needs to be an option. Certainly for those artists not substantially employed elsewhere, which is often

the case with (performance) artists who are constantly travelling due to the nature of their work.

**Sarah:** “Manyone wasn’t given a serious chance as a model in the performing arts field, not artistically, economically, or ideologically. We were lacking the tools to feed an analysis, but economically it could have been an interesting case study: How can we make artist-run structures more generative?”

I believe that more funding and fair pay for all artists and cultural workers involved can solve most of the imbalances. This can create the time and space needed to guarantee the necessary in-depth and transparent conversations about the ways of working, ethics, and the context in which the work occurs on an economic, political, and personal level. There is no magic formula for making an artist-run structure work, but if we want these kinds of structures as a society—going against a production-driven, streamlined, profit-making logic—we need to free up sufficient budgets for them and reduce the administrative workload. Since this is currently not the case, it is no wonder there is such high job turnover in small, artist-run organizations.

## The beginning of an ending

**Steven:** “Manyone was a difficult balancing exercise. If you start weighing up everything, that’s the end of it”.

**Juan:** “Little by little, we became less generous towards the structure. We wanted to be generous, but it was a dilemma: what are you giving and what are you receiving?”.

Then came the pandemic, two artists moved abroad, the imbalances kept weighing on the structure, and expectations began to differ. And then it was time to start writing a new dossier for structural funding for 2023–27. This not only meant dreaming, but also a lot of hard work: planning, discussing, and coming together.

**Sarah:** “Anyone was starting to take too much of a toll: mentally, physically, psychologically. When you’ve been too long on a small budget, frustrations start to grow towards a situation instead of towards people, but it still creates tensions”.

**Mette:** “When things become personal, something gets broken”.

Even though everyone involved in Anyone emphasizes that there were still close affinities and a lot of warmth, both on a personal and artistic level, the artists started thinking about another way of working for the organization before finally deciding to end the structure. “It got too draining”, Alma summarizes. In the end, there were too few means to keep five hearts beating.

But what happens when an organization is no longer there? The faltering of Anyone’s structure says something about the flaws in the larger artistic ecosystem. It says something about the means that a government is willing to free up for organizations that are not just production-based but about experimentation in artistic (self-) organization. In a system that is constantly pushing for output, it is difficult to remain in the invisible process of development and to resist the logic of continuous production. Are there lessons that can be learned within the arts field from Anyone?

## **Learning from an ending**

**Eva:** “To be together in real-time. That’s the basis”.

Anyone’s strength lay in togetherness, while the lack of time to meet collectively was one of its biggest weaknesses. The artists still cherish the ongoing dialogue, the sharing of their work, the insight into other practices, and the feeling of connection while still working as an individual artist.

The agility of the structure’s scaffold structure, which allowed a more organic approach to artistic processes, is also something everyone still firmly believes in.

Instead of having to start over and over again from the beginning, the artists still firmly believe in the benefits of working with one fixed coordinator in the development of an artistic and practical dialogue. For some, this collaboration with the coordinator was an incentive to organize and structure their work, to better articulate the content and needs of the work. For others, it drove a critical reflection on the work while simultaneously doing it. There was a sense of relief knowing that someone was ‘on top of things’. Other artists learned to better understand how to dose work and manage the workload entailed by certain questions.

**Alma:** “The combination of coordinator and production assistant works really well for me. It heightens the potential of the structure, makes it more useful, gives it more of a flow. Even though we resisted a continuous production mode, we tried doing things differently—with less focus on the market and more on artistic development”.

**Sarah:** “Manyone was a learning practice with a steep learning curve: how do I organize myself? It wasn’t an easy process, and I also learned a lot about how I didn’t want to work. It also taught me to respect even more how other people work”.

As a former coordinator, I completely agree that too much experience and knowledge are lost in our arts field because of the lack of continuity in collaborations between artists and cultural workers. At the same time, I learned that one cultural worker is not enough for a group of artists. Even with fair pay for everyone, I think an organization supporting several artists would be more balanced with at least two cultural workers who complement each other in terms of skills, dividing tasks and sharing the many responsibilities that come with supporting a group of artists with diverse practices and needs.

## Some advice

- Juan:** “Organize yourself together, share resources and solidarity. But make sure you share the same work ethics and ambitions. Be transparent, communicate a lot, meet a lot”.
- Eva:** “You must be able to think along with the people you work with and for. To be close together. As a cultural worker you have to understand that the organization is not the artistic work but rather supports that work”.
- Alma:** “Be aware of the tremendous involvement that is required, know that a structure doesn’t necessarily lighten the workload. Divide resources and time between different collaborators. Try out different models that maintain equality”.
- Mette:** “You have to think in really practical terms: what do you want the structure to do? Be hands-on. Understand the amount of work an organization takes. See what means you have and what you can do with them. And keep this important question in mind: how can you stay close to what you’re doing?”.
- Sarah:** “Know the amount of time and energy you are willing to invest. Don’t start without discussing things in depth, so that you don’t begin with unclear roles, expectations, and limitations. And appreciate the life lessons, because organizing with other people is extremely precious”.

## What remains

What happens to the knowledge built by the artists and cultural workers that were part of Anyone? On a personal and professional level, I still cherish the experience of co-initiating Anyone and working for the structure. Anyone entailed a very steep learning curve for everyone involved, but I’d do it again, even if it was hard. To this day, I still carry with me the lessons I learned during my time working for Anyone.

**Juan:** “Manyone is history, part of what I did. It was real and valuable”.

**Alma:** “The connections between us, the artists, remain. And I know Manyone still exists as a reference”.

**Sarah:** “I got to know people, on a human level, and sharing a path is something intimate. And of course, the work remains. The agility in Manyone made a more organic approach possible during the artistic processes of some smaller works”.

**Mette:** “The togetherness, solidarity, affinities, and sharing—this was real, and an important part of why Manyone was worthwhile. I don’t think of Manyone as a great but unrealistic plan. Our ideas about the structure still make a lot of sense today”.

Apart from the valuable lessons, what remains is this: a cherished experiment with self-organization that still resonates in the way all those involved work and how it fit within the larger artistic field. I hope it inspires other artists and cultural workers to self-organize and that it inspires our policymakers to optimize support for self-organizations.

