“What are the traces of a festival?” Expanded Dramaturgies of Curating“Different Narratives” – Baltic Circle – Critical Stages/Scènes critiques

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“Different narratives create different mindsets. And when we talk about new, sustainable practices, we should try something new.”
– Hanna Parry

Abstract

Building on Marianne Van Kerkhoven’s ideas about micro and macro dramaturgy, this writing expands the notion of (festival) curating beyond staging performances and shaping a repertoire, and examines how festivals are creating “cultural gathering spaces” (J. Applebaum), “assemblages” (A. Lowenhaupt Tsing), and “spaces for dialogue” (H. Parry) outside the walls of their building, venturing into site-responsive, process-focussed, and interdisciplinary practices. To illustrate this move from product to process, from consumption of art to civil participation in local issues of concern, the essay presents, analyses, and frames the Wild Trippers project (2020-2024) of Baltic Circle International Theatre Festival within a dramaturgical-curatorial context. Based on research interviews with Taru Elfving, Helsinki-based contemporary art curator, Trevor Davis, director of Metropolis (Copenhagen),and Hanna Parry, artistic director of Baltic Circle, the essay

seeks to find out what the guiding ideas and principles behind this new way of working are and how site-sensitive work can be contextualised within an art festival.

Keywords: curating, micro and macro dramaturgy, expanded dramaturgies, festivals, site-sensitive work, archipelago dramaturgies, climate change, theatre and politics, ecodramaturgy, assemblage

Introduction

In September 2023, I attended the Baltic Circle International Theatre Festival in Finland, near the small town of Ähtäri in the South Ostrobothnia region, some 140 kilometres north of Tampere. I was standing in a peatland, wearing a raincoat and a pair of muddy boots – an attire Glastonbury festivalgoers might find familiar! – but I was not facing a built stage or surrounded by a crowd of people. Instead, around me was a steaming swamp and I was standing alone, carrying an axe!

The air was filled with the spicy smell of the bog rosemary that was covering the damp, grassy earth. Further away, between the stems of young pine trees, heavy, white mist was wreathing. Around me, I heard people working in teams, chopping trees and sawing them into pieces for building dams – I could register them as colourful moving dots on the periphery of my vision. All of us here were 'audience members,' participating in Baltic Circle's nature restoration project – in collaboration with Snowchange Cooperative – entitled *Wild Trippers (Villin vieraat)*, set to rewilding the swamp of Siltaneva.

In theatrical terms, I was an audience member in an open-air immersive show, or perhaps a score (Vurdelja 47), an interaction facilitated between an ancient marshland and Baltic Circle Festival festivalgoers, a performance where our role as humans was to undo the harmful effects left by a century of industrial land exploitation, to allow nature to perform its role to the fullest. In environmental terms, I was part of a landscape restoration programme, acting to reverse climate change.

As the mist circling the trees slowly lifted, I became aware of a spiritual experience: with every breath I took, I felt something greater than me unfolding. Being enveloped by a living organism, noticing the swamp 'performing' with me, around me, and through the air I was breathing in, inside me. At the same time, I was relating to it, being in a silent, embodied dialogue with this complex ecosystem, living being – and this way participating in a "sympoesis" (Haraway 58), a collective and interdependent process of becoming, creating together an "alternative narrative" (Mustonen and Parry and Salmela).

Siltaneva marshland. *Wild Trippers (Villin vieraat)*, 2023. Photo: Katalin Trencsényi

That weekend of embodied interdisciplinary interspecies encounters left a lasting effect on me. It touched me deeper than any lectures on biodiversity and felt more genuine than any immersive performances I witnessed before. Baltic Circle's innovative approach by framing an environmental action as a theatre festival event, intertwined an aesthetic experience with a long-lasting climate action and contaminated our thinking of performance with the vocabulary of biology and nature preservation. Through the *expanded dramaturgy* of the festival, I had a unique, complex, hybrid experience, and witnessed a new approach to (festival) curating.

This essay is a part of a longer, two-part writing on expanded curating, that discusses the work of two international performing arts festivals in the Nordic region of Europe: *Baltic Circle* (Helsinki, Finland) and *Metropolis* (Copenhagen, Denmark). Both writings focus on two, so-called *second-wave* international festivals.

Through examining the curatorial policies of Baltic Circle, this essay advocates for the need to broaden the concept of artistic curating beyond merely staging performances and shaping a repertoire. It examines how festivals can create "spaces for dialogue" (Parry, *Interview*) and establish "cultural gathering spaces where makers, thinkers and audiences

can share knowledge across disciplinary boundaries" (Applebaum). Furthermore, these interactions can occur outside the walls of arts institutions, blending the boundaries between nature and culture, venturing into site-responsive, process-focussed, interdisciplinary, or hybrid practices, cultivating "*assemblages*" (Lowenhaupt Tsing 22-23; italics added) between humans and non-humans. As an example of this shift in curatorial practices, I will present Baltic Circle's *Wild Trippers* project.

The methodology for this examination is based on a comparative analysis of Baltic Circle's curatorial practices and philosophy, juxtaposing them with mainstream festival curatorial practices and with Metropolis (a similar, innovative second-wave festival that shares many values with Baltic Circle). For this analysis, I will use the *Wild Trippers* project, which spanned four-years from summer 2020 to autumn 2024, as a case study, focusing specifically on its 2023 event.

This case study is informed by my personal experience as an audience member during the two-day-long event on 2-3 September 2023. My analysis includes insights gathered from conversations with participants and project curators during these two days of *Wild Trippers*, as well as an interview I conducted with the festival's artistic director, Hanna Parry, a month after the event.

The investigative and embodied research material is completed with insights from research interviews I also conducted with prominent, visionary curators in the field working in the Nordic region: Taru Elfving (Finland) and Trevor Davies (Denmark), whose ground-breaking work centres around similar values of expanded and site-sensitive curatorial practices. I have also referenced relevant published works such as interviews, theoretical essays, and project descriptions related to curation, site-sensitive approaches, and Baltic Circle's work.

The theoretical framework of this essay is supported by my ongoing research into expanded and relational (archipelago) dramaturgies, as well as my study of Marianne Van Kerkhoven's work, particularly her writings on micro and macro dramaturgies.

Wild Trippers (Villin vieraat), 2023. Photo: Elina Kukkonen

On Curating

When considering the traditional curatorial functions of a theatre institution or a festival, the overall aim is not dissimilar from the traditional curatorial function of galleries and museums: essentially, it is about determining what to display in a given space. Whether it is the white cube of an art gallery or the black box of a contemporary theatre – from this point of view, the objectives are comparable. The aim is to create a journey, a *movement* for the spectators, leading the gallery visitor through the *space* between the separate artworks or guiding the audience member through the *time* of the performance. The goal of this journey is to allow the audience members to respond, forge connections, and form interpretations – a “soft narrative understanding” (Profeta 60) – of their experience, ultimately leading to a change in their inner state through the encounter.

Moreover, beyond the aesthetic experience, institutional curatorial work also considers how all the artworks on display contribute to the wider institutional narrative that the organisation intends to convey about its values. This involves emphasising the relationships between the artworks, exhibitions, and performances presented by the same

organisation over time. Together, these separate events and curatorial choices create a distinctive macro-narrative: the profile of the organisation. Such considerations in the fine arts led to the curatorial turn in the 1990s which drew attention to the performative gesture of fine art curating, and made art exhibitions discursive, critical, and political platforms. Similar change can be noticed in the performing arts a decade later, from 2000 onwards.

Yet, these artistic organisations, be they theatres or art galleries, are “more than containers of things; rather, they are complex reflections of the cultures that produced them, including their politics, social structures, and systems of thought” – notes art historian Elizabeth Rodini. Although Rodini makes this statement in the context of museums, I think it is equally applicable to theatre institutions.

The modern institutional-structural framework for presenting artworks in museums, art galleries or theatres in the West shares many similarities. Those institutions that are familiar today for their (ancient Greek) temple-like architecture (expressing symbolic meaning) and function (public service) were established in Europe from the 17th century onwards, and can be linked to ideas of knowledge production, national pride, shaping national narratives, and often preserving colonial heritage. In the early 20th century, both the emerging black box theatre format and the white cube art display foregrounded the idea of the artwork being a separate entity (establishing its own world) that is to be understood and interpreted entirely within the framework of its distinct context. When the curatorial turn posited the work of a curator from a preserver of collections to an *auteur*, this aligned closely with the roles of theatre’s artistic directors, intendants, and institutional dramaturgs.

Yet, this particular curatorial function has become increasingly problematic. What are the values the act of curating expresses? How can space be held for diverse or sometimes even conflicting values within the same institution? How can curating avoid degrading artworks and artistic activities to merely marketable products? How can organisations reconcile with their colonial heritage? These are just a few of the many curatorial considerations that art organisations face today.

Micro and Macro Dramaturgies

One of the earliest efforts to regard curating in theatre as a concern for dramaturgy can be found in the essays of the late theorist and dramaturg Marianne Van Kerkhoven, written in the 1990s – around the same time with the emergence and theorisation of the curatorial turn in the fine arts. According to Kerkhoven, *micro dramaturgy* refers to that area of the dramaturgical work that is “situated around a concrete production” (Van Kerkhoven, *Van de kleine* 67). Others, like theorist Peter Eckersall, describe this work related to developing a piece as a “creative practice that bridges an idea, a worldview, and an activist message with its presentation or representation in and through live performance. It is an agent in a creative process that draws attention to the structure, means of expression (language, sensibility, aesthetics, form), framing and conditions of performance.” (Ferdman and Eckersall 4)

“But a production comes alive through its interaction, through its audience, and through what is going on outside its own orbit,” notes Van Kerkhoven (*The Theatre is in the City*). Therefore, in contrast to micro dramaturgy, *macro dramaturgy* involves dramaturgical work at a higher organisational level with a broader focus. Van Kerkhoven states:

There is a kind of dramaturgy of the house – how to present itself, how to present its people. It has mainly to do with how a theatre wants to be in the world, how it wants to relate to the landscape and to an international context (Van Kerkhoven, Unpublished lecture on micro and macro dramaturgy 2).

This form of dramaturgy addresses the “social relevance and function of theatre” (Van Kerkhoven, *Van de kleine* 67), focusing on the larger context behind a work of art and its relationship to the social roles and responsibilities of the theatre as a public institution, as well as its coexistence with local communities. It is the curatorial work that deals with developing the profile of the organisation and expressing its values, philosophy, and artistic policy. In essence, it is concerned with the narrative that the theatre tells about itself and its place, role, and responsibilities in the world.

Expanded Dramaturgy, Expanded Curating

The notion of *expanded dramaturgy* emerged approximately a generation after Van Kerkhoven’s essays on macro dramaturgy appeared. The development arose from the gradual shift of considering dramaturgy as merely a compositional tool for an in-house artistic process, and extend its strategies of care, mediation, and criticality to interdisciplinary contexts. Here, we can notice some parallel developments with contemporary art curating.

Taru Elfving, a Helsinki-based contemporary art curator and researcher, views her role primarily as a form of being in dialogue with different agents. She sees herself as a *mediator* not only between audiences and artworks but also between “different places, sites, societal, institutional, and environmental settings” (Elfving, *Interview*). Additionally, she facilitates between “diverse modes of knowledge and agencies,” as well as “between artists and their thoughts and practices,” taking care of “processes of investigation, inquiry, intervention” (Elfving, *Interview*). Elfving’s description of her role as a curator aligns well with Van Kerkhoven’s thoughts on *macro dramaturgy,* highlighting many similarities between an art curator’s and a dramaturg’s work.

Curator Taru Elfving in 2022. Photo: Jussi Virkkumaa

Elfving's approach to the curatorial function positions her in a liminal place, working and moving between various interdependent actors: artists, artworks, disciplines, institutions, audiences, and even non-human entities.

These are places where dramaturgs, too, are in motion, operating through the modes of generative questioning, facilitating dialogues, and creating connections. Dance dramaturg Miranda Laurence (inspired by Tim Ingold's critique of cartography) calls this enquiring dramaturgical movement taking place in liminal, processual places: *"wayfinding"* (*"Nowhere-in-particular"*).

Knowledge creation is an important area of the curatorial-mediator work. Elfving points out that many forms of knowledge are being lost or becoming extinct as their practitioners age. Moreover, some types of knowledge are not connected to current discussions for various reasons. She believes that acknowledging these gaps in knowledge production presents an opportunity for the arts:

The arts have the potential to contribute to this discourse by recognising and being attentive to those gaps, and being able to, through artistic methods, not fill those gaps but draw attention to them, and allow us to engage with them and open up a dialogue between these different forms of knowing (Elfving, *Interview*).

The traditional idea of curating often begins within the institution itself, focusing on what will be brought in and displayed in the building. However, Elfving's "*site-sensitive approach"* challenges this notion from the outset, relocating the focus *outside the*

institution. This kind of work starts with two key questions: *"Where are we?"* and *"When are we?"* It then follows the inquiries that arise from these foundational questions. Elfving states:

This inquiry into the historical aspect – investigating the layers of time that are present everywhere – is critical. That's why the work always begins with questions about *where* and *when*, as well as *how*. It then seeks to situate these inquiries within the context of *why we are here* and *what we are doing in that specific place at this moment*. This approach necessitates being self-critical and discussing how and why we carry out our activities (*Interview;* italics added).

These questions echo the curatorial inquiries posed by Dominic Cooke, former artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre in London, when seeking new plays and making decisions on manuscripts: "What is a play? and Who are we now?" (qtd. in Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making* 38). These questions suggest that the starting point is not the considerations belonging to the organisation, such as its available spaces and time slots or the size of the auditorium, but rather issues, questions, polemics that exist outside its walls, and the organisation's relationship with those concerns. In other words, the socio-political considerations are inseparable from the aesthetical decisions during the curatorial process. Elfving's practice aligns with this philosophy and adds an ethical-environmental aspect to it:

It is crucial for my creative process to take moments to pause and reflect on how we act and practice in the arts. This reflection brings forth many ethical questions. How do we ensure we do not assume access to places, knowledges, communities, ecosystems, materials, archives, and whatever else we engage with? What does it truly mean to respond to these places in a manner that is not extractive or rooted in a colonial mindset that suggests having good intentions grants us the right to access?
This process involves operating at the edges of our own understanding, becoming more aware of the limitations of our knowledge, and inquiring further. It requires us trying to step towards that quite uncomfortable zone of open-ended exploration beyond the limits of our expertise (*Interview*).

Considering these approaches, the role of a curator expands beyond taking care of artworks, artists, or processes. I consider these open curatorial strategies a form of *expanded dramaturgy*, to which in this curatorial context I refer to as *expanded curating*.

This way of operating preserves methods and sensitivities familiar from *new dramaturgies* and *artistic research*: an open-minded, open-ended approach focusing on investigation, material, and process. It promotes fluid and slow approximations achieved through practice, without necessarily knowing the outcome in advance, and maintains dialogue with various agents (both human and non-human) involved in the process. It respects diverse knowledge systems – both ancient and modern – allowing investigations to transcend institutional norms and accepted aesthetics. It embraces a variety of approaches to knowledge creation, including embodied work and utilising instinctive knowledge as a "working instrument" (Van Kerkhoven, Unpublished lecture on micro and

macro dramaturgy 3). The main difference, though, between devised theatre dramaturgy and expanded dramaturgy is that this latter – although it may borrow tools from the former – is executed on a macro dramaturgical scale.

The concept of *expanded curating* in the performing arts emerge by shifting the focus of institutional curatorial work. These new curatorial considerations question, for instance, the nature of an artwork, the relationships between the organisation, the artist, and the audience, and rethink the role, function and responsibility of the institution. Expanded dramaturgies in curating may (temporarily or permanently) leave established spaces of display and art consumption, taking their curatorial and dramaturgical strategies outside the institution or even outdoors to operate in new contexts.

These considerations and practices resonate with the philosophies of the Helsinki-based Baltic Circle Festival.

Wild Trippers (Villin vieraat), 2021. Photo: Tani Simberg

Baltic Circle

Based in Helsinki, Baltic Circle is an international contemporary festival for theatre and performance characterised by a social conscience. It started as a network for theatre professionals in 1996, initiated by the artistic directors of the progressive independent theatre, Q-teatteri, Jukka Hyde Hytti and Erik Söderblom. Their aim was to encourage exchange between the theatres of the Baltic-Nordic region. Baltic Circle's activities included "organising an international theatre festival, artists exchange, drama translations, international co-productions, and European cultural initiatives" (Baltic Circle "History").

The first Baltic Circle festival took place in 2000 in Helsinki. Three years later, it became an annual event, held in the autumn. The festival leadership is usually a duo of artistic and managing directors, who typically serve in this role for an average of 4 – 5 years. From 2020 onwards, the festival has been run by artistic director Hanna Parry, in dialogue with the festival's managing director(s). This dialogical, or to frame it another way: dramaturgical way of working is important for Parry (*Interview*); and aligns with Baltic Circle's operational history.

Baltic Circle is curated by invitation only. The themes of the festival vary annually, depending on what questions the organisers identify as current and urgent. The festival's artistic mission claims that:

Baltic Circle believes in the aesthetic and affective powers of the arts, and in the potential of social and political agency of performance. The works seen at the festival search for new forms of performing arts and revised modes of production ("About").

The festival (apart from a shared office) does not have its own venue but works in collaboration with others and often uses unusual, non-theatrical spaces for their performances. As a strategy to make their precarious financial base and reliance on annual funding more resilient, the festival collaborates with international organisations, production centres, theatres, educational institutes, media, and other cultural stakeholders. Among these partners some organisations work in other areas than performance. Thus, interdisciplinary work characterises many of Baltic Circle's recent collaborations.

Parry's curatorial work is distinguished by refocusing on the Nordic, Baltic, and Arctic regions. She believes in the importance of being locally rooted and aware of one's own history. Given the current international conflicts, she considers it essential, both strategically and politically, to strengthen relationships with neighbouring countries and maintain an open dialogue with them. (Parry, *Interview*) These values resonate with those of *hyperlocal festivals*, which emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hyperlocal festivals are characterised by site-specific programming that emphasises local stakeholders and advocates for local cultures and communities (Mason 2).

Refocusing the festival on local and regional collaborations also came from Parry's dissatisfaction with the global trend of "festivalisation." She recognised how unsustainable it was working on an international festival circuit: not only because of environmental exploitation (the amount of transport and flights touring works demanded) but also for her concern about the wellbeing of the participating artists. Parry interpreted the burnout that the organisers, the festival crew, and the participating artists felt as a warning sign, calling for change. She asked herself whether it would be possible to "hold and feed this very special festival energy" (Parry, *Keynote*) without destroying the people and the planet. It resulted in a change from product- to process-oriented way of working. Parry notes:

Working with social and political grievances and urges has always been part of Baltic Circle. For me, contextualising and understanding the histories and circumstances that shape reality and artistic thinking is often even more relevant than the actual artistic outcome. It does not make programming less ambitious or the works weaker but rather *moves the curatorial question of what to how*. This shift is necessary if we imagine a sustainable future for the arts field (*Keynote,* italics added).

Social and ecological sustainability became core values when strategising and curating Baltic Circle. This shift of focus changed their working methods, the festival's form and production. "Different narratives create different mindsets. And when we talk about new, sustainable practices, we should try something new," notes Parry (*Keynote*).

For Parry, the answer for sustainability lay in a larger scale solution and paradigm shift in how Baltic Circle was operating. A sustainable festival for her meant to change the tempo of the festival and apply ways of working traditionally associated with the micro dramaturgical level – such as slow dramaturgy and "softness as a practice" (Parry, *Interview*) – to the festival's macro dramaturgical level.

Hanna Parry, Artistic Director of Baltic Circle at the 2021 edition of *Wild Trippers (Villin vieraat)*. Photo: Tani Simberg

The change continued with examining her own curatorial practices, looking at the principles, the time frames, and finding the blind spots of their work. Questions Parry found crucial were: "who is missing from the room?", and "who shall be heard"? (*Keynote*). Another important factor in Parry's curatorial policy was a commitment for Baltic Circle to be an active agent for advancing social justice: the festival "clearly takes a stand and creates counterforces to the horrors of this time" (*"Hanna Parry mitä kuuluu?"*).

Parry regards the main aim of Baltic Circle is “to deal with the colonial responsibility and (…) that way of writing the history” (*Interview*). Therefore, she seeks to find other ways than from the Eurocentric perspective to understand, interpret and operate in the world; ‘telling stories’ about land(scape), identity, memory, lost knowledge, social justice, and human rights. The mission statement letter written by Parry announcing the themes and aims of the 2023 Baltic Circle confirms this aim for intervention: “what if we treated the festival as a medium for transformation?” (*“Preface”*)

From these questions and values, new, long-term collaboration came about. Such as *Towards Reconciliation,* a socially-politically motivated work in alliance with the Sámi Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is concerned with the colonial responsibility of cultural institutions and exploring ways for cultural reconciliation. The *Radio That Matters* project, an interdisciplinary collaboration between three European festivals and local radio stations, promoting diversity and acoustic justice. And the *Wild Trippers (Villin vieraat)* project that focuses on environmental activities and landscape rewilding.

Wild Trippers (Villin vieraat), 2023. Photo: Tani Simberg

Wild Trippers

Baltic Circle’s social, political and environmental concerns led to their long-term collaboration with Snowchange Collective, “a global network of local and Indigenous communities working on climate change solutions” (Goldman Environmental Prize video, 0:56–1:02) with focus on local culture, biodiversity and ecosystems. Snowchange was co-founded in 2000 by Finnish environmental leader, researcher and scientist, Tero Mustonen.

Originally a fisherman from the village of Selkie in North-Karelia, Mustonen had first-hand experience of the devastating ecological damage caused by decades of industrialisation: the cutting of forests for timber and the draining, exposing and mining of peatlands for energy production. Mustonen and his colleagues recognised the major part peatlands – these terrestrial wetland ecosystems, which cover approximately 30% of Finland's surface area (Pohjankukka et al) – play in the ecosystem by "keeping carbon on the ground, and (…) drawing CO2 from the atmosphere" (Mustonen in Goldman Environmental Prize video, 1:11–1:16).

To reverse the environmental harm industrial peat mining caused in the area, Mustonen developed a grassroots movement for landscape revitalisation and ecosystem restoration. Since 2017, Snowchange Collective has used the strategy of buying degraded peatlands and rehabilitating them – this way reversing the damage. The aim of the work is to rebalance the ecosystem so that it would be self-sustaining. In this work Snowchange combines local, traditional knowledge and indigenous knowledges with the latest science. This is the "largest rewilding and restoration campaign ever in Finnish history," notes Mustonen. (Goldman Environmental Prize video, 3:31–3:36) Since their first purchase of land, Snowchange has overseen the restoration of seventy peatlands, over 500 km^2, enabling and witnessing nature's powerful capacity for regeneration, "if we are making it possible for nature to guide the work" (Mustonen in Goldman Environmental Prize video, 4:39–4:42). For this outstanding environmental work, demonstrating a climate change solution in Europe, Mustonen won the Goldman Environmental Prize, the "Green Nobel" in 2023.

In 2020, Baltic Circle joined forces with Snowchange. The festival was given its own dedicated restoration location, Oravasuo in Ähtäri, South Ostrobothnia, a boggy peatland 325 km north of Helsinki. Thus, "the basis for rewilding work in arts context was set" (Parry, Google Doc comment). Parry says:

It was clear to us that neither the festival nor our audience would have money to sponsor the rewilding efforts on this location. However, what we do have is expertise in creative thinking and gathering people together (*Keynote*).

In 2021, the bog revitalisation programme started for the organisers and the audience with an initial excursion to the site during the Baltic Circle Festival. This trip gave the curators of Baltic Circle an opportunity to learn more about the industrialisation's hardcore land use and its implications on, not only the nature but also the local communities. The encounter allowed the curators to find new alliances locally, as well as provided them with a unique experience connecting with the living ecosystem of the bog. Parry recalls:

What happened first was that our relationship with the swamp changed. It was not any more a landscape somewhere outside the city, a new environment or backdrop for events. It became the protagonist and we [became] its audience. We were greeted by the smells, the wind, the birds, the flora and the fauna of this very special place that offered us berries and a golden sunset (*Keynote*).

Equipped with the previous year's experience, Baltic Circle returned with members of the public for a weekend in September 2022. Instead of fitting the programme to the festival's November calendar, they adjusted the schedule of the event to suit nature's rhythm, and timed the activity when the water circulation was ideal for the work. The festival visitors participated in a two-day-long, low threshold, hands-on environmental activity: rewilding a marshland by building dams. The same programme was repeated as part of the 2023 and 2024 festivals, until the revitalisation work was completed.

Wild Trippers (Villin vieraat), 2023. Photo: Katalin Trencsényi

The programme entailed travelling together on a coach from Helsinki to Ähtäri. On site the participants were warmly welcomed by the owners of an old farm, Vanha Väätänen, taking pride in hosting guests for over five generations. After a refreshing meal, walking to the swamp followed, working there in groups under the instructions of the environment experts. At the end of the day, home-made dinner and sauna by the lakeside rewarded the people returning to the farm. The following day, over breakfast there was an opportunity to hear a presentation by Mustonen on the environmental issues Finland is facing and learn more about Snowchange's work. This was followed by further onsite work at the swamp, before the coach returning the participants to Helsinki.

During the execution of the rewilding project, whilst the environmental activities were led by the environmentalists, the overall dramaturgy of the event was carefully planned and facilitated by Parry and her team. This *non-intrusive dramaturgy* was characterised by slow, organically unfolding movement of events, whereby the organisers withdrew from

controlling the action or creating any kind of hierarchies or making loud announcements about schedules or timetables. Instead, they created invitations for encounters with respect, empathy and gentleness, and gave the participants agency and responsibility in their choice of actions. In a way the dramaturgical strategies of facilitating the process mirrored the strategies that were taking place in the bog: withdrawing imposed human agency and allowing other, natural rhythms to unfold.

It was the rhythm of the environment (the weather, the diurnal cycle, the changes of the light) and the behaviour of natural elements (the peat, the water, the wind) that organically guided what would follow next. Whereas during the rewilding, the team members adjusted their actions to each other's and learnt to work together, sharing the different tasks and tools. Parry says:

That's an example of a project where we really try to have some courage to just see how it develops, and support that spontaneously. Simply, because there is no previous example to follow of how to do this right, how to work as a theatre festival on a peatland. What we try to create is space for listening and negotiating: what is the role of the body now in this environment, can we use our body to repair something that other bodies and machines have ruined? The work is physical, we learn by doing, we start collaborating with each other and exchanging with the environment. We can deal with something concrete around the abstract notion of climate crisis. Of course, it is also a carefully planned illusion (it is a theatre festival after all); the people must feel well so that they can concentrate on working for and with the land. That's made possible with invisible pre-production work and decisions such as, we don't tell the schedule and plans beforehand, nor do we introduce ourselves with our titles or social status. These kinds of decisions create space to encounter the land without social load and performativity, and ideally create new mindsets and action (*Interview*).

This marshland restoration project worked in two ways: whilst the participants were engaged in the swamp partaking in a physical, durational action, which brought about change in the landscape, at the same time, an embodied, tactile, kinetic learning and changing also took place on the part of the human agents. Being in contact with the landscape, having a non-verbal dialogue with the bog, participating in a physically exhausting, repetitive, yet somehow meditative activity that gave pleasure was a very special, sensitising experience.

Wild Trippers (Villin vieraat), 2021. Photography: Tani Simberg

It was notable that since this environmental activity was framed as part of a performing arts festival, the two vocabularies (one belonging to the environment and biology, and another to performing arts and aesthetics) contaminated each other during these two days. The bog was performing as a protagonist (there were distinguishable sounds, lights, and actions), whereas conservation activities were described as multilingual conversations. Words such as taking care and cultivating gained new layers of meaning. Through these activities, porous borders between nature and culture were found. Via deep listening and turning with respect towards a particular ecosystem, a two-way connection and communication unfolded in its own time between humans and non-humans. A cathartic, elating, unique experience took place. Parry says:

I am convinced that creating a bodily experience of the subject changed people more than if we would have been organising a discussion about it in a seminar room somewhere 400 kilometres away from it. I believe that art can have a remarkable role to play in this time of climate crisis and transformation. We are here because the past decades have shown that scientific knowledge and abstract scenarios have not really motivated politics, nor the masses into climate action. But art works differently.
Art has the potential to create social movements that have feelings and personal experience as their driving forces (…) and the ability to create empathy and explain complex causes, consequences, relationships, relations (*Keynote*).

Conclusion

Recent crises are forcing the performing arts to re-examine their values, norms, aesthetics, and working methods. The established European institutions (theatres, galleries, festivals) represent and operate within a structure that has inherited and thus inherently carries the values, histories and hierarchies of a capitalist society. Within neoliberal Western countries, the arts are marginalised as separate, non-productive entities that exist in isolation, and are validated mainly through their quantitative productions (ticket sales, number of visitors). Theatres, art galleries, and performing arts festivals are pushed to operate within this structure, which leads to a product-centred, profit-oriented, unsustainable, and exploitative way of working. Some cultural operators grew critical of this, especially that it negates the social role and responsibility of the arts and depoliticises them.

Expanded dramaturgical practices take the tools of dramaturgy (critical thinking, working in dialogue, deep listening, processes of care, working through questions, wayfinding through not knowing) and applies them in interdisciplinary or hybrid contexts, often outside the building of an art institution. This notion of curating shifts the emphasis from product to process, as well as strengthens the connection between the artistic intervention and its environment.

Expanded curatorial practices turn around the traditional direction of curating, and instead of focusing on the institution, they start elsewhere: the public space, the local problems, the artists. These processes are rooted in the place where they are operating.

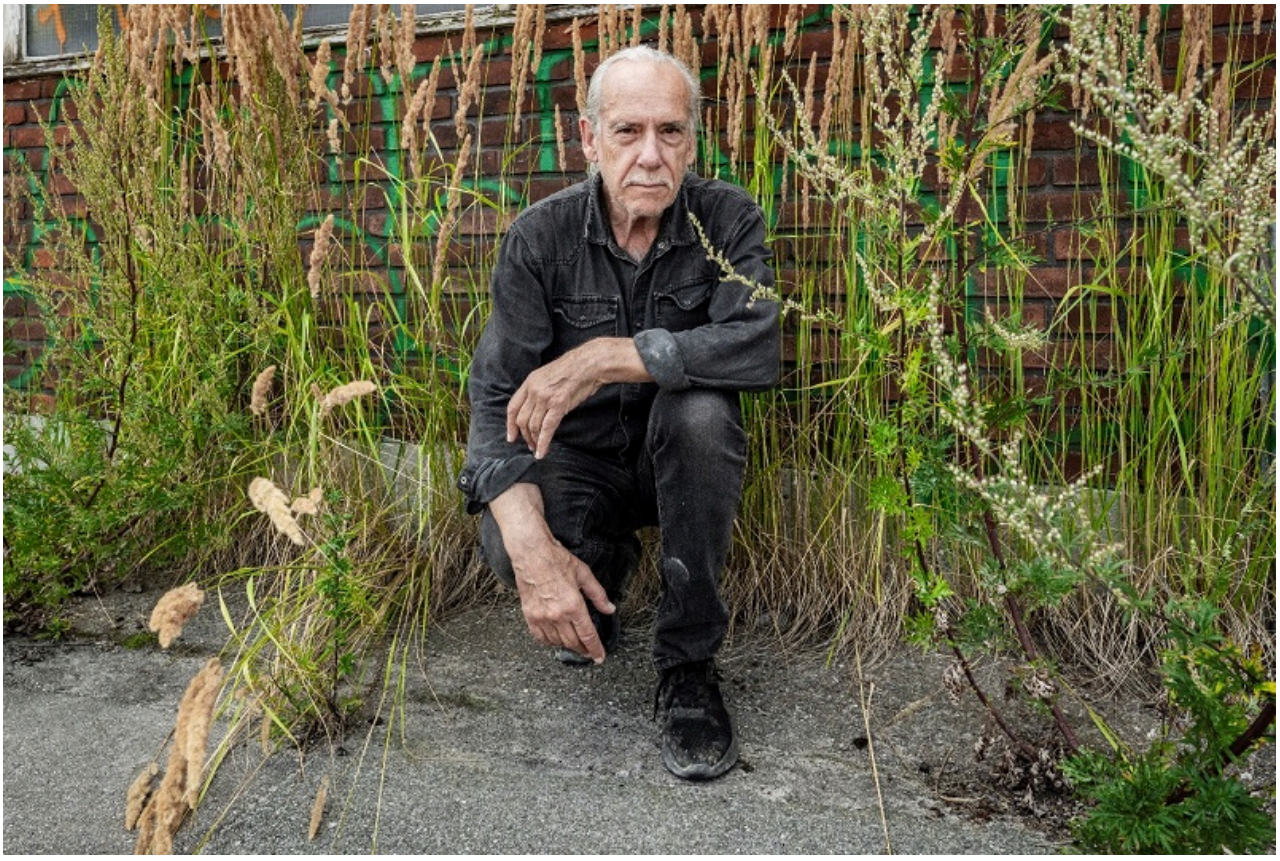
This kind of work is characterised by collaboration and forming alliances locally. The curatorial role is non-hierarchical, dialogical, relational, and is concerned with facilitating temporary and fluid constellations, taking care of processes, and developing *cultural ecosystems*. This is a slow and organic process, responding to global issues yet the work is focussed on the local world. It places value in developing meaningful, long-term relationships, an activity that takes its own time, and letting them mature without controlling their speed or trying to reap results.

This new, expanded curatorial model posits a different way of thinking about curating a festival: it promotes a slow and organic process allowing work to emerge. In this model the curatorial work instead of selecting artworks to present, focuses on creating the framework for the artistic process, the macro dramaturgy for the work. With this curatorial shift, they trust that under these circumstances, through the means of artistic tools, new knowledge, new understanding of the world will emerge.

These organisations regard this way of working with their platform and their macro dramaturgy as a process of developing and maintaining a dynamic, living system. This is characterised by non-hierarchical, relational, fluid, archipelagic, and often nomadic ways of working. Trevor Davies, artistic director of *Metropolis* (Copenhagen), a festival and a laboratory for art and performance in public space, notes about the *archipelagic nature* of the expanded curatorial dramaturgy:

We are looking at *things in tiers as flows of time and systems* rather than systems of structures which are static. It is looking at it as flow charts and interactions. You look at kinds of islands or attraction points and then bring certain people together and then send them out and then bring others together. So, you are looking at a *dynamic system of impulses and pulses* which are working, and which are reinforcing each other, and which are also making small projects now. And if you are doing that, you have to look at yourself as a *mobile facilitator* rather than a static organisation (*Interview,* italics added).

With these shifts, it is inevitable that the nature of the platform is fluid, and so is the role of the curator. Parry's "soft" and respectful approach to the collaborative working processes is matched by Davies' notions of floating, constant relocating, and "managing that flow" strategies (*Interview*), recognising when his role as a facilitator or enabler is needed and when it is important that he initiates a dialogue. Davies says: "I think it is also a shift of responsibility, but also a shift of power, and also a shift of when you are available and how you talk" (*Interview*).



Trevor Davies, artistic director of Metropolis. Photo: Jens Raadal

This also changes the attitude towards what is shown, what is shared. For Davies it is trusting in the raw energy of artistic responses, that react quickly to a situation or a question, whilst not compromising the expectation of showing the highest aesthetic quality. However, for him what is more important is the urgency of the work: "It is presenting relevant stuff at the right time, in the right context and not about showing the best first" (Davies, *Interview*).

This is clearly a shift of emphasis from the aesthetic towards the political. It is reclaiming the social-political role of the (performing) arts in the society, by creating space for it in working for the community and allowing it to promote societal change. Davies notes:

I'd like to be able to define what the theatre is. I have always seen it as a platform for alternative thinking. But now I think it is interesting that it can be a platform for alternative doing or alternative being (*Interview*).

This political (re-)turn also means that engaging with the festival requires a different attitude not only from the curator, the artists, and the critics, but also from the audience. Davies adds: "Because they are not coming for these mass experiences, they are coming to be part of a creative journey or part of an investigation, or part of an expedition" (*Interview*).

Expanded curatorial strategies and collaborative ways of working – in dialogue, through networks, through archipelagic relationality – create new alliances and *assemblages*. To end with Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's inspirational thoughts on their value: "Assemblages are open-ended gatherings. They allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them. They show us potential histories in the making" (23).

Oravasuo marshland. *Wild Trippers (Villin vieraat),* 2023. Photo: Katalin Trencsényi

Note: This essay concludes a trilogy on new dramaturgies, a series of essays, I published in *Critical Stages*. The first part, "*Heterarchical Dramaturgies*" (issue no. 24, December 2021), addresses composition. The second part, "*The Seven Principles of Leave No trace Dramaturgy*" (issue no. 26, December 2022), discusses working processes. This final instalment focuses on curating.

Cover image: *Wild Trippers (Villin vieraat),* 2021. Photo: Tani Simberg

Endnotes

Parry, *Keynote.*

The companion essay to this one, titled *"What Are the Traces of a Festival?" Expanded Dramaturgies of Curating. "A Platform for Alternative Being." Metropolis* is set to be published in 2026 on Metropolis' website. The essay is based on my research into Metropolis' curatorial practices and further explores the topic of festival curating and archipelago dramaturgies. (The quotes in the title come from Davies, *Interview*, 2024.) Whilst each essay on expanded dramaturgies of curating stands on its own and does not require the other for understanding, reading both together provides a more comprehensive view of the subject.

Experts have differing opinions on when the second wave of international festivals began. Ric Knowles suggests that they are originated in the late 1990s (2) – although one of the examples he cites, *Metropolis*, was established in 1980 (under the name: *Københavns Internationale Teater* or *KIT*). At the same time, Keren Zaiontz believes these festivals began around 2000 and onwards (17). I am of the opinion that it is not their date of establishment rather the scale, function, aims, and the way these international festivals operate that would be more helpful in their classification. However, what is characteristic of the second-wave festivals, and I agree with Knowles on this, is that these urban festivals are generally smaller in scale and community-oriented compared to the first or 'founding' international festivals that emerged after World War II. The curatorial policy of the second-wave festivals is often characterised by experimental and/or interdisciplinary work (Knowles 2-3).

During my two years of research (2023-2025), I received invaluable support from many individuals and organisations. I am especially grateful to my interviewees, Trevor Davies, Taru Elfving, and Hanna Parry, for their contributions. I would like to thank the Archives and Museum of Flemish Life in Brussels (AMVB) and its archivist, Florian Daemen, for facilitating my research. A special thanks goes to my husband, Nick Tomalin, for being the first reader and providing feedback on the drafts of this essay. The text has also been shaped by the feedback I received from students and staff members of the Department of Theatre and Film at Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt am Main, where I had the opportunity on 11 June 2024 to present the first draft of this research as part of their Hölderlin lecture series. My research trips to the Marianne Van Kerkhoven archives in 2023 and 2024 were made possible through ERASMUS grants.

I recognise that this crude comparison somewhat overlooks other crucial curatorial tasks of museums and galleries, such as collection, restoration, preservation, and the storage of artworks.

By this term, Profeta understands an intuitive sense of order or sequence even without explicit plot or language. Thus, “soft narrative understanding” is an emergent sense of implicit narrative that the audience members generate through their perception and memory (60).

Eugenio Barba calls the agent for this emerging meaning, *evocative dramaturgy,* which results from aesthetic stimuli and aims to activate the audience members and create a change in their inner state (10).

In an earlier work, I discuss the traditional curatorial role in theatre. See: Trencsényi, 2015, pp.31-49.

In these essays Van Kerkhoven introduced the terms as *“de kleine dramaturgie”* and *“de grote dramaturgie.”* Later, in an English language paper she refers to them as “Small” and “Large dramaturgy.” Today, though, they are preferably referred in English as “micro” and “macro” dramaturgy.

From here onwards, the English quotes of this particular Van Kerkhoven essay are translated with the help of Google Translate.

For more on micro and macro dramaturgies and their ethical-processual implications, see my essay, “*The Seven Principles of Leave No Trace Dramaturgy*,” published in the December 2022 issue of *Critical Stages*.

Site-sensitive is a term coined by Elfving. See, “Undisciplining Art and Ecology,” p.236.

Furthermore, Van Kerkhoven emphasises the importance of this form of knowledge: “I believe in the importance of intuition. (…) Intuition is a kind of intelligence that you cannot prove, that you cannot put into reasonable words or even into language. You just feel that something is right. Intuition is a working instrument” (*Unpublished Lecture on Micro and Macro Dramaturgy* 3).

Since 2020, Parry has been working in collaboration with managing director Hanna Nyman (2020), followed by Asta Teräväinen (2021-2023) in the role, and Tiff Tian Zhang taking over from March 2024.

It is not a coincidence since Parry started her position as artistic director during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown period she participated actively in the *Imagining Futures* online meeting series, London, May – July 2021, jointly organised by EUNIC, Goethe Institute, London, and Transform Festival (UK), rethinking the aims and operations of performing arts festivals. For more on this, see *“WHAT IF? Rethinking Europe’s independent festival landscape’*, *Imagining Futures*, May 2022.

According to my knowledge, Hannah-Leigh Mason identified this festival format in 2022.

Quote translated with the help of Google Translate.

For the historical timeline of Snowchange's environmental work, see here.

For more on archipelago dramaturgies, see Trencsényi, 2022.

For more on the work of Metropolis, see their website.

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Photo: Pavel Bogolepov

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