

# **Feel for the Game: on stage, back stage, and in the boardroom -- the challenges of long-term youth engagement toward diversifying the cultural sector**

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Over the course of most of 2020 two events have dominated my (and almost everyone else's) various newsfeeds: Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter protests, both of which have had significant global effects. This is not so surprising in the case of the former, but somewhat unexpected in the case of BLM, with protests occurring in some odd locales, like the very isolated island of Unst, the northernmost tip of the United Kingdom, a place populated exclusively by some pretty pale people, indeed!<sup>1</sup>

Clearly something important is going on, even if it is not exactly clear how to frame it

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<sup>1</sup> I spent about two months living, working, researching and presenting a project on Unst in 2017-18 and met a good many of its 632 inhabitants, none of whom were people of colour.

or completely understand it, as each manifestation points to a different context and different concerns. In America, the legacy of slavery still permeates, with the question of reparations on the table, and a very widely held concern about the militarisation of the police, their excessive use of lethal force, and their disproportionate burden on public resources. In Canada, where there is no direct link to slavery, the more American term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) is tweaked to read IBPOC, with concerns for Indigenous people rising to the top of people's minds. The same is true in Australia, where the rallying cry has been outrage over Indigenous deaths in custody. In England, where the contested acronym BAME (Black, Asian, Minority, Ethnic) is often used, the focus is also on police behaviour and bias but, without nearly the same level of lethal force as America, the concerns are focused primarily on stop and search policies as well as the question of unequal opportunities in general.<sup>2</sup> During the June 2020 spasms of anger consuming America, British filmmaker Steven McQueen, the first Black director to win an Oscar for his *12 Years a Slave*, took to the Guardian and wrote favourably of the advances of black representation in the American film industry, while decrying the glacial pace in Britain.<sup>3</sup> This suggests a tangled complexity with high levels of lethal force but satisfactory representation seen on one side of the Atlantic, while on the other, in the UK, deaths and adequate representation are both at low levels. In Germany, the anger was a reminder to the public that America is not the only place with issues, and the protests in Berlin focused variously on police brutality toward black people, a concern with the populist far right, and the ubiquity of everyday racism.<sup>4</sup>

It is a complicated situation, with the rallying cry Black Lives Matter meaning one thing in one location, and something slightly different in another. However, in most of these places, the toppling of statues and challenges to historic street names with ties to the injustices of colonialism and slavery suggests some sort of epochal reckoning, with many

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<sup>2</sup> British police generally do not carry guns, while in American, not only do 100% of the cops carry weapons, but 44% of the entire population claims to live in a “gun household.” (Saad, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> McQueen, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Cunningham and Sarhaddi 2020  
Oltermann 2020  
Walsh 2020  
Wait 2020

converging on the certainty that the background fact to all of this is — no matter where you are, what your context — historical sins are still very much with us.

One concern that seems to be relatively consistent across many contexts is the role that the cultural sector plays in maintaining imbalances, with lack of sufficient representation a common concern, as well as detailed stories of abuse, neglect and other biased treatment. Twitter hashtags have popped up chronicling the racism people have experienced in cultural institutions as well as plenty of careful scrutiny of the artistic, administrative and board-level leadership of many organisations including theatres, galleries, museums and the film industry.<sup>5</sup> Overt racism has been credibly documented, but also claims that more pernicious factors are at work, these factors often summed up with the descriptor ‘systemic.’ But what exactly is the “system” and where can effective interventions make change?

Since 2006, I have been engaged with the question of diversifying the systems of the cultural sector, working with children and young people in Toronto, London, and the German’s post industrial Ruhrgebiet region.<sup>6</sup> The model I first developed in Toronto under the auspices of my performing arts company Mammalian Diving Reflex (Mammalian) has been since applied to Germany and Europe with varying degrees of success. The fact that success has not been consistent across all contexts provides the possibility to gain a slightly deeper understanding of the “system,” in terms of what mechanisms work for whom and in what contexts.<sup>7</sup> With three cases to compare — Toronto, London and the Ruhr — conclusions will have to be provisional, but I think some relatively clear causal lines can be sketched. In this chapter I will first take a quick look at the literature on diversity and cultural engagement, particularly in the European context, then I will introduce the Succession Model of Youth Labour Engagement (the SMYLE) with the second half of the chapter focused on a

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<sup>5</sup> Balzar 2020  
Bowen 2020  
Columbus 2020  
Di Liscia 2020  
Krieger 2020  
Nestruck 2020

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed description of this work, with a full enumeration of the model see (O’Donnell 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Pawson / Tilly 1997

comparison of the key conditions in each locale; what worked, what didn't, examining successes, failures and teasing out some possible candidates for necessary conditions for success in the realm of long-term youth engagement when diversify the systems of the cultural sector is the goal.

## **Diversity and Cultural Participation**

For the most part, the question of diversity in the cultural industries in Europe has largely focused narrowly on audience development, with the recognition that shifting demographics are a threat to the traditional state-funded institutions, which tend to appeal to only the most highly educated and wealthiest<sup>8</sup>. When examining the relationship between cultural consumption and education, Notten et al, attempt to divide cognition — that the more highly educated are more likely to “get it” — from the motivation of attaining status, in line with the distinction theory proposed by Bourdieu.<sup>9</sup> Typically - and particularly in Canada and the UK - the more educated everyone is, the less that acquiring status plays a role in cultural consumption. However, this relationship is not so pronounced for Germany, where status incentives are still quite strong.<sup>10</sup> It appears that in Germany cultural snobbery is alive and well. This I would consider a systemic attribute that is a bit of a wicked problem with no obvious place of purchase to make change. Bourdieu sums it up nicely with his concept of habitus, where agents acquire a “feel for the social game.”<sup>11</sup> How does a feel for the game get shared and equitably distributed, when the game is about distinction to begin with?

This question is no less relevant when looking beyond audience development to the responsibility that cultural institutions have in the wider task of cultural integration and societal harmony. On the website for Germany's National Action Plan on Integration, reports of the first three phases of a five-phase plan are available. Currently we are at Phase Three “Inclusion,” which does not yet consider arts and culture, as they are targeted for Phase Four “Growing Together.” This fourth phase hinges on the 15 Thesis on Cohesion in Diversity

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<sup>8</sup> Almanritter 2014, 2017

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu 1984

<sup>10</sup> Notten / Lances 2016

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu 1990, 27

agreed upon in May 2017 by the members of the German Federal government-funded Cultural Integration Initiative. These fifteen points seem, at times, more like a stern cautioning to an implied other with items like: the fact that cultural customs evolve, the importance of gender equality, that religions must follow the rule of law, art can cause displeasure, and controversy is important. All very valid points, to be sure, and all aspects that contribute to a feel for the game, but as a grounding for diversity in arts and culture they suggest that there is still a significant gap of understanding to close, from both directions. Additionally, these sorts of concerns seem better suited to Phase 3, Inclusion, and must precede any meaningful participation beyond mere spectatorship - like actually creating the work as collaborating artists - the sort of active participation implied in the concept 'Growing Together.'

Looking at ninety-six initiatives across Europe to integrate refugees and migrants, MacGregor and Ragab note most that focused on theatre based their work on the principles of Augusto Boal and his Forum Theatre. Forum Theatre, which features audience members stepping in to use improvisation to intervene and propose alternative interactions in fraught situations, might have some value as a social tool, but not so much as an enjoyable artistic experience. While the various artistic events - theatre or otherwise - were targeted at a general audience, the intention was to "encourage intercultural dialogue and understanding of the 'other,'" again privileging social over artistic outcomes. Furthermore, while artists were behind the creation of many of these events, migrants themselves were not included as artists, and, instead, were the subject of these interventions. A very similar situation can be found among the many projects boosted by The Cultural Integration Initiative mentioned above where most of the artistic projects were deployed to increase civic engagement and not to diversify the cultural industries themselves.

There are intercultural and migrant theatres that deal with migrant artists but the work done there, again, tends to be understood as pedagogical and sociocultural but not so much as art, with these theatre groups usually classified as "lay-theatre" or semi-professional.<sup>12</sup> In situations where artistic value does takes precedence over social goals, there remain a number of problems experienced by artists of colour, with frustration expressed at the limited and

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<sup>12</sup> Sharifi 2011, 36

often racist roles they are assigned and the presence of racist tropes defended under the banner of free speech<sup>13</sup>. The concept of “post-migration theatre” acknowledges a generation of artists who are ethnicised and racially discriminated against which has necessitated the creation of independent structures and venues to respond to this exclusion, where resistance and empowerment are necessarily added to an artistic mandate<sup>14</sup>. In Sharifi’s (2017) comprehensive survey of the European theatre scene, her focus on developing this new resistance of cultural spaces, examines the challenges when it comes to the education of artists, looking at the various ways that people gain expertise in the field, finding these avenues to be very limited.

The Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018 report *Art in an Immigration Society* recommends the training of young people as multipliers and team players in furthering cultural diversity. They find that successful projects tend to be those that are flexible without a fixed agenda or offering. However they recognise that integration through artistic projects cannot merely be one-offs, they require a long-term approach but lament that, within the many projects they studied, it is unclear how the institutions delivering the programming might be structurally changed, and point out that until managers and executive staff are not primarily of German-origin, projects attempting to foster diversity will “remain stuck in a ‘speaking about’ mode.”<sup>15</sup> This is echoed by Sharifi who calls for a restructuring of publicly financed institutions and an associated redistribution of resources to position marginalized communities in the decision-making positions.<sup>16</sup> This call to challenge the racial and ethnic composition of the staff and, in particular, the boards of organisations has been growing stronger over the last few years, with the recent BLM protests making it unavoidable.<sup>17</sup> However hopeful this might seem, we’ve been here before, at least in the Anglo world. The 12 recommendation of the Arts Council of England’s 2001 *Eclipse Report to Combat Racism* stated that “board training is a key opportunity to change,” and called for a national Board Bank. It finally

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<sup>13</sup> Sharifi 2018

<sup>14</sup> Sharifi 2011

<sup>15</sup> Dogramaci et al 2018, 17

<sup>16</sup> Sharifi 2017

<sup>17</sup> Rentschler / Azmat 2017  
Miranda 2017

happened in 2019<sup>18</sup>, almost twenty years after the initial recommendation.

To date, research on diversity in the cultural sector has focused almost exclusively on the question of attracting diverse audiences, with scant examination of attracting artists beyond looking at the contexts in which they are there as a resistant other, in the post-migrant theatre framework. What is completely missing is research on the even more challenging question of how to attract and maintain a diverse workforce within the production and administration teams and at the board level. It appears that the question has been posed in the wrong order, with what is stopping the audiences from becoming more diverse preceding the more fundamental question of why the artists themselves are not more diverse, with the question of why administrative and board positions are not diverse not appearing anywhere at all. In terms of rectifying the problem, the leaks in the system must be plugged at all levels, with any solid and consistent presence of a diverse audience being quite unlikely until the other components have been addressed. But if you think that it's going to be tough for a diverse audience to get a feel for the game, the challenge of acquiring a feel for the game by diverse staff and board members is steeper. However, if this puzzle is miraculously solved, not only will the other questions about diversity amongst artists and audience likely fall into place, but so, too, do the socially ameliorative and integrative aspects of culture.

## **The SMYLE**

The Succession Model of Youth Labour Engagement (SMYLE) was developed in Toronto over the course of 2010-2016 in collaboration with a group of young people — who chose to collectively call themselves “The Torontonians” — all of whom were either foreign-born immigrants/refugees or the Canadian born children of immigrant/refugees. The Torontonians trace their roots to Sri Lanka, Tibet, Vietnam, China, India, Nepal, and the Phillipines and I, as the leader of this crew, am the grandson of Polish, Ukrainian, Italian and Irish immigrants, described by my friend and artist Michal Maciej Bartosik as “all the losers of Europe.” While most definitely white, I have a fairly visceral understanding of what it's like to not have a particularly strong feel for the game in relation to the cultural industries; my parents' idea of

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<sup>18</sup> Cause4 2019

high-culture was a yard sale followed by a Clint Eastwood western at the drive-in.<sup>19</sup> Both of which I highly recommend.

Details of my collaboration with these young people and the many projects that we created, as well a full enumeration of the model's specific principles are covered in detail elsewhere<sup>20</sup>. Key to the discussion here is that the orientation toward the youth rests on the assumption that all cultural engagement has the ultimate utopian goal that the young people are being trained in order to take over the company (or, in fact, the entire sector), in what is understood to be a succession plan. Whether or not that actually occurs is much less important than holding that intention and the principles and approach that follows, the most important ones, for the discussion here, are collegiality and the sharing of social and cultural capital.

With collegiality, the young people are understood to be colleagues, with the work created in collaboration to be shared in professional contexts for audiences appreciative of contemporary performance, as opposed to process-oriented youth work designed only to really benefit the young people, for a limited audience, typically friends and family. The work we created together as colleagues was made for the international performing arts festival market.

Flowing logically from considering the young people colleagues is the intention to build their social and cultural capital — their feel for the game — sharing with them an understanding and embodied comprehension of the cultural fabric that Mammalian and our institutional collaborators occupy so that the young people can walk through the cultural world knowing that they are not only welcome in these various international institutions but that they are a part of them. Sharing networks and knowledge is the least one would do for one's colleagues, and not just for the colleagues' sake, but to benefit the entire operation - one's own interests included! The same logic exists with the young people, as networks and knowledge are shared not just for the youth's benefit but to benefit the entire cultural sector and the wider community. Highlighting the positive outcomes for the broader social fabric with the triggering of collegiality – and possibly even friendship – between young people and

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<sup>19</sup> But to be fair to my parents, they were unwaveringly supportive of my choice to become an artist, with my mom bringing hot meals to me while I rehearsed school plays.

<sup>20</sup> O'Donnell 2018



the adults is rare, but central to Mammalian's method, with the very intended side effect that the sector is diversified.

## **Three Contexts: Toronto, London and the Ruhrgebiet.**

Despite seemingly different contexts, there is quite a bit of similarity between the three areas in which we have been running the SMYLE. In Toronto, visible minorities account for almost 50% of the population<sup>21</sup>, in London people of colour comprise just over 40%,<sup>22</sup> while in the Ruhrgebiet, those with dual citizenship and other nationalities are very well represented amongst those under the age of eighteen: in Duisburg and Gelsenkirchen almost 50%.<sup>23</sup> The specific neighbourhood in Toronto is Parkdale, which is experiencing rapid city-led gentrification, a fact also echoed in the London neighbourhood of Tottenham, where the city is also pushing gentrification<sup>24</sup>. The Ruhrgebiet, while a fairly large post-industrial area, has also rested some of its hope for the future on becoming a bit of a cultural hot spot with a recent study suggesting that the region could well be the next Berlin, as delusional as that might sound.<sup>25</sup> In each case, Mammalian's long-term youth engagement is designed to collide a group of young people with the area's cultural sector, introducing them to the work, the artists, the staff, the leadership and, on the adult side of the equation, inviting all of these insiders to participate in a cultural co-parenting of a cohort of young people from age twelve to, hopefully, the grave.

In Toronto, after having now run the program for ten years, Mammalian regularly deploys The Torontonians internationally to co-direct the projects we created; with four working as part time staff, including two accountant graduates, who handle our finances. We've also got three of them on the Board of Directors, with two having sat in the position of Board President, supported by the other more senior members. The SMYLE is working quite

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<sup>21</sup> Census Canada 2016

<sup>22</sup> Mayor of London 2011a

<sup>23</sup> AG Ruhr 2015

<sup>24</sup> Mayor of London 2011b

<sup>25</sup> Regionalverband Ruhr 2020

well in Toronto.

In 2012, Mammalian began our long term relationship with young people in the Ruhr through the Ruhrtriennale Festival first delivering The Children's Choice Awards, a project in which we chauffeured a group of about sixty kids to almost all the shows and then lauded the shows with awards at a fancy award ceremony with lots of glitter. The Children's Choice Awards was the centrepiece of the festival's youth engagement strategy, No Education, under festival director Heiner Goebbels, and was nominated for the BKM Prize for Cultural Education. The Children's Choice Awards was presented in the two subsequent years, while concurrently Mammalian created new work with the first year's cohort both at the Ruhrtriennale and the Fidena festival, stabilising a group of around ten relatively committed young people, who then selected the moniker Mit Ohne Alles (MOA).

In 2015, in response to Mit Ohne Alle's desire to open up the collaboration we recruited a group of young refugees, as well as group of youth from a school populated primarily by students with a migrant background, adding forty to the mix and, together, created a new work for the the Ruhrtriennale under new intendant, Johan Simons. This new and improved Mit Ohne Alles continued with Mammalian at the Ruhrtriennale for two more years creating a couple dozen different works, and garnering another BKM nomination for our Teentalitarianism. In 2018, under intendant Stephanie Karp, they continued to create work with other artists while Mammalian followed Johan Simons and Cathrin Rose, our beloved dramaturge, to the Bochum Schauspielhaus, where they employed long-time Mammalian freelancer, Jana Eiting as Theatre Pedagogue. Currently, Mit Ohne Alles continues to collaborate with the Ruhrtriennale, the Bochum Schauspielhaus and, of course, Mammalian Diving Reflex.

In the 2011 London Plan, the London Borough of Tottenham was identified as both an Opportunity and Intensification Area, with a number of 'areas of change' targeted for the development of homes, jobs, retail, sport, leisure facilities, and public transportation. In August of 2011, the neighbourhood was set aflame by riots that spread across the UK in response to the police murder of Mark Duggan, a 29-year old black man. On the cultural front, this precipitated a flood of resources into the neighbourhood, including programs by the Royal Court Theatre, Punchdrunk and a program called the Tottenham upLIFTers, which was my application of the SMYLE under the auspices of the London International Festival of

Theatre (LIFT). LIFT and I began the work in 2014 in collaboration with a cohort of thirty children from two schools that share the same physical building, with one serving young people with disabilities. Additionally, through an audition process, we selected eight Tottenham artists to be involved with the initiative to create various sub-projects over the years. The team included a culturally diverse crew of two filmmakers, a former runway model turned musician, a theatre director, an actor, two dancers and a spoken word artist.

The first year of the upLIFTers featured monthly workshops in the school with each Tottenham artist sharing their form with the young people and concluded with The Children's Choice Awards, with the intention that the children see all twenty of the shows presented in the 2016 LIFT festival. In the end, they saw only five, the first of a series of challenges. Year two was entitled Live on High Street and featured the children and five of the artists collaborating with local businesses to create site specific performances on the high street. The third year focused on building an understanding of the wider LIFT artistic family through outings to institutions including The Tate Modern, Punchdrunk, The Royal Academy of Arts, and the Battersea Arts Centre, culminating with a festival presentation of Nightwalks with Teenagers, which was co-directed by members of The Torontonians and Mit Ohne Alles. Due to budgetary issues and inconsistent staffing, the fourth year featured very spotty workshops dedicated to developing a new work with one of the Tottenham artists for the 2020 festival. This inconsistency haemorrhaged all but a tiny group of the youth, with almost nothing happening in year five, and everything coming to a halt because of Covid-19 in March 2020. Efforts in the Autumn of 2020 to revive the engagement, were rejected by the tiny contingent who remained, on the grounds that the previous two years had been badly and inconsistently planned and they suspected it was only going to get worse.

So, as it stands now, we have three locations with three very different outcomes, particularly in the case of London, which sputtered to a halt. The Torontonians are now in their mid-twenties and are not involved formally in a program, as such, but have graduated to co-directing the work internationally, working for the company as staff and serving on the board. Mit Ohne Alles is alive and well, having just premiered a new mixed-reality work incorporating performance and 360° video, in collaboration with myself and Mammalian, and are involved in a number of other projects in the region.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will compare aspects of the three initiatives that I

consider relevant to their differing outcomes: organisational mandate, resources, youth recruitment and retention, planning and expectations, staffing, and the activities themselves.

## **Organisational Mandate and Resources**

Toronto-based Mammalian Diving Reflex is a performing arts company that tends to collaborate with non-artists, and uses performance to bring people together in unusual social configurations, triggering shifts in understanding. Over the past ten years, we have presented about 20 projects a year, typically in international contemporary performance festivals like the Ruhrtriennale and LIFT. London-based LIFT is a contemporary performing arts festival, which occurs every two years for ten days, presenting international contemporary performance. The most recent festival in 2018 featured seventeen shows from 12 countries. The Ruhr-based Ruhrtriennale is a yearly region-wide festival and tends to present work in former industrial sites temporarily repurposed as performing arts venues, presenting about thirty shows during the course of an entire month. The Ruhrtriennale tends to be more focused on large-scale opera, dance and music presentations, while LIFT presents more modest and idiosyncratic works of performance. Financially the difference is clear in just a quick glance at the size of their respective teams, with the Ruhrtriennale employing dozens, LIFT with a tight team of eight and Mammalian with two full-time staff and a few part-timers. While the Ruhrtriennale is a behemoth compared to LIFT, significant costs are accrued with the yearly converting of industrial venues into theatre space. However, ultimately, the difference in outcomes had little to do with resources, as evidenced by the fact that Mammalian, operating at a minuscule fraction of the other two, has managed to be very successful at long-term youth engagement.

## **Youth Recruitment, Access and Retention**

How the young people were initially recruited, our access to them and how they were retained was an important point of difference between the three locales. While all began as a partnership with schools, it was here that some cracks begin to appear with workshops and rehearsals happening during school hours in Toronto and the Ruhr, while in London, the

administration was not willing to give up instruction time, with doubts held about the pedagogical value of the work. In the case of Toronto, the head teacher confronted us in a first casual meeting with a very stern question: “what’s in it for the kids?” which we answered to his satisfaction, with a brief and convincing statement about the value of children sharing their opinions in a public forum for an adult audience. In contrast to Toronto, with years and much experience under our belts, we came to the school in London armed with a Powerpoint presentation featuring evidence-based learning outcomes and some data from the research literature on the economic health and rosy future for the cultural sector including the fact that the jobs are more resilient than service, retail and lower-end manufacturing. However good all of this news was, over the years I was repeatedly told by the staff at the London school that these particular young people didn’t have the luxury to take a risk on a career in the arts, and that they were destined for more practical pursuits.<sup>26</sup> This devaluing of arts and culture was probably most clearly exemplified in the difference the two schools treated The Children’s Choice Awards, with the German school allowing the children to see all of the work, including very challenging pieces with nudity and strong language, while the London school forbid the children to see any work that contained even a single swear and insisted that they had to be home for bed by 21:00, thereby making it only possible for the children to see five of the twenty shows. Having worked many times in both the UK and Germany, as well as other countries of continental Europe, the irrational overreach of child protection in the UK is a consistent irritant, where children and their parents are often deprived of any standing, with school administrations insisting that they know best. It is a consistent headache to work with young people in the UK, a fact that many of my artistic colleagues have corroborated over the years.

In terms of what was initially on offer to the youth and the schools, in both Toronto and the Ruhr we merely promised a first project, then proceeded year-by-year in an ad hoc and casual way, responding organically to the interests of everyone with the schools

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<sup>26</sup> Considering the effects of Covid-19 on the performing arts, the school may have been right after all, but at the time these concerns felt very much like the school administration had less faith in the youth than we did, however I expect that they would accuse me of over-estimating the industry’s openness to children from Tottenham. And given what we know about challenges with diversity in the sector, I may have to concede that point, but not without a fight.

eventually dropping away as we began to engage the youth directly. In London, the 5-year project was pitched to the school in its entirety, with each year clearly defined and specified with respect to objectives and outcomes, with the school not only insisting that they remain supervisors on the project, but deliberately stonewalling any attempts we made to contact and organise the children directly or through their parents. The difference here is important to note, particularly in that it is rather counter-intuitive, since a thoroughly defined program that a school administration insists keeping tabs on would seem to have a higher likelihood of success than programs that were more ad hoc, with no clear intention to continue year after year, and no school to track the project. The opposite — in this case anyway — appears to be true.

Schools are a challenging place for artists — even outside of the UK — and artists often come into conflict with the staff, with the termination of projects as likely an outcome as any.<sup>27</sup> In London, we eventually detached from the school, but our initial dependance on their labour to organize the young people meant that these skills were not particularly well developed in the London team, and nor had the young people evolved a collective identity outside of any supervising adults, something that evolved naturally in Toronto and the Ruhr, where the monikers “The Torontonians” and “Mit Ohne Alles,” were arrived at through consensus, not dictated top-down as we had done with the upLIFTers. The adhoc nature of the two successful initiatives also meant that, very early on, if the young people wanted to participate they had to show some initiative, which initially produced a rapid rate of attrition and then levelled off, with a core group remaining very committed. In London, it was death by many slow cuts, the young people often begrudgingly participating at the pestering behest of the school’s administrators and, ultimately, leaking out of the project entirely.

## **Staffing and the Ship of Theseus**

The most significant difference between the three initiatives was probably the organisations’ staffing, bringing to mind the metaphysical paradox of The Ship of Theseus: if every single wooden plank of a sailing ship is gradually replaced one-by-one over the course of many years, is it still the same ship? This analogy only goes so far and runs aground if you add the

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<sup>27</sup> Kneip 2010

factor that the replacing of the planks causes the ship to behave very differently. In which case I'd have to say: no, it's not the same ship, and my experience bears this out.

In all three instances there was staff turnover, but at very different rates, to very different degrees and in a very different manner. In Toronto, the core operating staff of myself, a producer and a manager remained consistent over the years, with the other youth-related freelancers coming and going. In the Ruhr, while the artistic directorship of the Ruhrtriennale was occupied by three different people, the lead dramaturge assigned to Mammalian, Cathrin Rose, remained consistent. When Rose moved to the Bochum Schauspielhaus, she took Mammalian and Mit Ohne Alles with her. Jana Eiting, initially a German-based Mammalian freelancer who always led the projects at the Ruhrtriennale, was subsequently hired by Cathrin to continue this work as an employee of the Schauspielhaus. Eiting's role is particularly interesting in that, in addition to leading the Ruhr projects, she was also regularly engaged by Mammalian to deliver our other projects internationally — in collaboration with both children and adults — including a six month stint living in the small German town of Hemsbach on a Mammalian project in collaboration with refugees. At the Schauspielhaus she is our main collaborator, while still leading occasional Mammalian projects during her off-hours, thus managing to keep our connection with Mit Ohne Alles very much alive on a day to day basis. In addition to the continued relationship with the original Ruhrtriennale team, after they moved on the festival promoted one of the junior dramaturges into the position formerly occupied by Rose, and the relationship continued with Mit Ohne Alles for the next three festivals (2018-2020). Just recently, one of Eiting's assistants, who has worked with us over two years and three projects at the Schauspielhaus was let go because of Covid-19, only to be hired by the Ruhrtriennale as a dramaturge for their youth activities, where some members of Mit Ohne Alles continue to work. So while there has been plenty of musical chairs, the key players have remained the same, all the switching of organisations actually working to the advantage of the youth.

In London, the turnover has been very high, even by the standards of a mid-sized cultural organisation, with three different Artistic Directors over the course of the five years, two Executive Directors and, three individuals in the role of the Senior Producer shepherding our work as well as many other of the main stage projects, placing a steep premium on these producer's time. Currently, the role has been vacant for most of 2020. A part-time Assistant

Producer, directly dealing with the youth, did span four of the five years of the project, but they were not included in and unaware of strategic decisions or planning. This high turnover would be challenging for any long-term project, but with a project that was specifically designed to build a resilient professional network it proved to be fatal. Compounding this was the fact that, in contrast to the Ruhr, the sector in London is massive and when the staff moved to different organisations their ties to not only the youth but most of the other collaborators were effectively severed. This high turnover also affected the sort of artistic decisions we were able to make, and challenged our ability to involve the young people more directly by making it difficult to be responsive to their specific personalities and interests. In contrast, the Ruhr, while geographically sprawling, is a bit of a cultural small town, with everyone knowing each other and needing to work together in concert.

My role in the three initiatives also varied with a near full-time presence in Toronto, conceiving of and leading the work; in the Ruhr I am present at least once a year for two to four weeks to lead projects and make plans for the future; while in London my presence in the first three years was at even more regular intervals, however due to LIFT's 2018 budget struggles my presence was phased out almost completely in the last two years, with some pro bono services offered to support the local artist who led the project that was eventually stalled by covid in 2020. In the first three years of my more fulsome engagement with LIFT, the high turnover was still a challenge to maintaining consistent programming, as each new replacement of the team had to be brought up to speed with the project's ethos and objectives, in addition to the dispiriting dissipation of the possibility of forming a resilient network for the youth.

There is one more very important factor that has really helped with the consistency in the Ruhr, a factor that could go a large distance in explaining the success there. When we continued with a second year of programming in 2013, when the young people were 13-years-old, I invited Dramaturg Catherin Rose's 10-year-old daughter, Emma, to participate. While first a peripheral player, the older youth eventually took her under their wings, then as time passed and we worked together more and more, the age difference became irrelevant, and Emma became close friends with most of Mit Ohne Alles, becoming a full member, often acting as a strong representative for the wider youth at the highest level: her mother. Collegiality here shades into the familial and I view Emma's presence as a total asset not only



anchoring her mother's commitment to the project, but increasing the chance that the networks we are building with the youth have the resilience to continue as the young people move into adulthood. Cathrin Rose is not only sharing her professional networks with the youth, she's sharing her DNA, a gesture that she did not impose on the project, but that I lobbied for, in order to ground Cathrin's commitment, something I did with full — and humorous — transparency and her full cooperation. While this is a very unusual arrangement, it is something I intend to explore in future projects, devising ways for the children of organisational staff to be involved in the youth outreach projects in a manner that does not detract from objectives or syphon off resources, but adds value for everyone. The philosophy grounding this gesture in particular is based on the idea that any attempts at systemic diversity are destined to fail if the lives of those delivering the projects aren't directly affected and, most importantly, changed. If only the youth's lives are changed, then long-term systemic change is simply impossible. The organisation must change and an organisation is nothing but its people. Emma's life has been changed and her mother's along with it, not to mention the rest of the youth, Mammalian and myself, and I expect that we will all have a long collaborative relationship into a distant future.

## Activities

Finally, to conclude this comparison, I will briefly outline the differences in the sort of programming and activities that occurred in each location. With my strong presence in Toronto, I was able to be very responsive to the young people's interests, allowing them to guide the content, while I and my other adult collaborators took more responsibility for the form.<sup>28</sup> This obviously gave us a great advantage in terms of sustaining the youth's interest. Even though my presence was more spotty in the Ruhr, because of the larger capacity of the Ruhrtriennale to commission projects, then later the Schauspielhaus, the work was a mix of new works inspired by the interests of the German youth and presentations of the work I had first created in Toronto. London was doubly hampered by their smaller capacity to

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<sup>28</sup> This division of labour, with the adults keeping a close eye on the interests of the young people and proposing formal artistic frameworks to share these interests is another one of the core principles of the SMYLE. See O'Donnell, 2018 for details.

commission new work and the fact that I wasn't able to be on the ground as I had in Toronto and had no consistent representative like both Rose and Eiting. Live on the High Street, which was the second year's activity, suffered from limited access to the youth, with the lead artists doing their best to include them at the conception stage, with, at best, mixed results..Again, working under the auspices of schools is very challenging, with activities often crammed in whenever small slivers of time can be secured.

Beyond the artistic engagement, Mammalian and the two organisations in the Ruhr managed to not only facilitate school-based work placements and internships, but in a number of cases, actual employment. Public talks and presentations have also been a consistent feature of the work in both Toronto and Germany, with the youth presenting publicly about the work locally and in distant cities. The lack of internships and opportunities to publicly discuss the work in London was due to the smaller, already heavily taxed resources and the high staff turnover, which blurred their focus on the overall objectives of the project and produced a lack of familiarity with what the youth had to offer. The Torontonians, in particular, have been the beneficiaries of the longevity of the project in that locale and many of them have repeatedly co-directed the projects in other cities, with ten of them working with Mit Ohne Alles in 2016 and 2017, and members of both collectives collaborating with the upLIFTers in 2018, as we continued to build everyone's feel for the game across all three of the iterations.

Before concluding, I just want to emphasise that the difficulties in London were no one's fault. Everyone did their best, and engaged with the youth to the limits of their own very-taxed capacities. The kind of champions and commitment required to engage in effective long-term systemic change in youth engagement are rare and certainly well beyond the typical call of duty for anyone sane enough to attempt to maintain even a modicum of a life-work balance in a very under-resourced and highly demanding sector. For Cathrin Rose, Jana Eiting and myself the dedication is absolutely related to carving out a particular lifestyle and role within the community at large, with the fairly substantive cost of a lot of emotional labour. My work with the Torontonians as a formal collective was too taxing to sustain beyond the five years of very exciting activity, but has produced a model that, with a stable and dedicated team, is reproducible.

## Conclusion

The SMYLE approaches the problem of diversity within the cultural sector very early and from within, not attempting to carve out a special exclusive place for resistance — as important as that is — but as co-conspirators in an approach to changing organisational leadership that understands the organisations themselves as having a duty of co-parental care in a redefinition of the social role of the organisation, with individual members asked to step up, not with just their professional lives, but with their personal lives as well. The question expands, then, from how do we get the kids on stage, to how do we get the kids backstage, in the administration offices, across the active life of the city and, finally, how do we get them into our lives?

This sort of commitment is not only not for everyone, it is simply not possible in all contexts. The successes in the Ruhr and the steep challenges in London point to key conditions that appear necessary, the most obvious being consistency within the team delivering the program — an obvious fact, but made all the more obvious when considering that in the Ruhr the team has been criss-crossing between organisations. The ethos of collegiality and the sharing of social and cultural capital is central to the work in Germany, with staff often going to extraordinary measures to continue their relationship to the youth, very much in the spirit of a village raising children. How else do we expect our sector to respond to the urgent need to dismantle old systems and build anew if not starting with, in the very first instance, our very lives?

I'll leave the final word to economic geographer Allan J. Scott: “In the last analysis, any push to achieve urban creativity in the absence of a wider concern for conviviality and camaraderie — which need to be distinguished from the mechanical conception of “diversity” — is doomed to remain radically unfinished.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Scott 2006

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