



DORTE GRANNOV BALSLEV | SEPTEMBER 3, 2024

Performance across generations

The **Horsens Theater Festival** runs from 20-22. September with as many as 35 children's and youth performances on the programme. ISCENE had a conversation with **Live Art Denmark** and Canadian **Mammalian Diving Reflex** about working cross-generationally with performance art and about a major paradigm shift in the approach to user involvement.

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It is the anniversary year for Horsens Theater Festival's experienced performance artists. Mammalian Diving Reflex is 30 years old, Live Art Denmark is 20 years old, and their Live Art for Children Festival is 10 years old. This means that the artists have met generations of children and young people through performance art. A genre that Ellen Friis finds that children have an immediate curiosity about and that can easily accommodate them.

Curiosity is also absolutely crucial for the artists that Canadian **Darren O'Donnell** from Mammalian Diving Reflex calls "a strange bunch of us". Performance artists such as Live Art Denmark and himself, who is part of a research network in children's and youth theater (**FKJT**) based at **the Fundus Theater** in Hamburg under the direction of Sibylle Peters. He describes himself as a kind of ethnographer who for six years lived and worked with 15 teenagers of Asian descent in Toronto and says:

For me, art is a good excuse to do weird things and get people to get to know each other

"As is the case with all artistic collaborative relationships, you are usually friends first and ideas are better discussed over a beer than in a rehearsal room. It's not just about presenting a good piece of work, but about the effects it has on the real world. For me, art is a good excuse to do weird things and get people to get to know each other."



Ellen Friis and Henrik Vestergaard from Live Art Denmark, receiving the Spring Prize 2021. Photo: Nikolai Linares

Interactive art with children

About the foundation of Live Art Denmark, Henrik Vestergaard says: "We take interesting adult art and show it to children and their adults, because it has more to offer and there is something for several generations". Ellen Friis remembers that the early years at Nikolaj Kunsthal featured works with bare butts and cave installations on top of the art gallery, but always based on participation. Henrik Vestergaard continues:

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"We have made something *for* children, and we have made something *with* children and shown works *by* children. The interactive has always been an essential component because we believe it is a good way for children to understand the world, to do it themselves. We are not interested in giving children artistic tools in a particular form. Performance can open up the whole world, so we want to make children experts in the world and not in a specific art form."

READ ALSO: [Live Art Denmark receives the Horsens Children's Theater Award 2023](#)

A good example of this is the popular work *Haircut by Children*, which Darren O'Donnell created in 2006, where local children receive a week's training in cutting hair, and then cut the audience's hair for a hairdresser talk. In other projects at Live Art Denmark, children have, for example, printed their own money and hung street art in the street space.



Darren O'Donnell. Photo: Jure Erzen

Debate-generating works with children

At the Horsens Theater Festival this year, children and adults can recreate small, historical performances in the performances *Playing Up* and *Hverdagen – the world's most boring performance*. In the latter, female artists in particular challenge the idea of the male artist as a genius who creates art for eternity such as marble monuments or as the artist who legendarily throws paint on large canvases.

SEE ALSO: [Video with *Hverdagen - the world's most boring show*](#)

Among other things, the participants can work with the work *Spitting Food* from 1996 by the British artist, Bobby Baker, who spit food products such as ketchup and red wine onto white tea towels. The various works are recreated by the children and described in more detail in a catalog for the adults.

"A six-year-old should not relate to feminism's criticism of capitalist society. But a six-year-old understands that we take a different approach to these everyday objects such as cornflakes and shoes, which they normally see in a completely different context," says



Henrik Vestergaard. Ellen Friis adds: "Things you do on a daily basis can also be art. The children understand that, and that is the in thing. The nuances, with women and men and so on, capture the mothers."



Playing Up. Live Art Denmark.

The art of seizing questions

Ellen Friis believes that we often misunderstand childhood: "As soon as people themselves are about 20 years old, they almost see children as a completely different race that needs special ways of being spoken to. But apart from the fact that children are shorter, childhood is the period when you learn rules. The children are no more sensual or stupid. They are just as intelligent as adults. They just haven't learned the rules yet. There are social rules, professional rules, traffic rules, sports rules, and therefore there is a lot of negotiation in it. After all, children are interested in mastering the rules because they are aware that it is the entry card to the adult world," she says.

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Henrik Vestergaard adds that they do not work to produce nice works: "The central thing is the journey itself, the investigation and the questions that the artists take the children on. The value is that the individual finds his own answers, or keeps asking."

Questions and answers are also central to Darren O'Donnell, whose recent performance, *Sex, Drugs and Criminality*, arose from many conversations with young people who broke both taboos and social conventions for a conversation at a dinner table:

"It was our joint meeting and their breaking of conventions that led me on the path to a very simple performance format where they and other teenagers could ask these questions and express their curiosity," he says.



Sex Drugs and Criminality Mammalian Diving Reflex_Martin Steffen

New generation of digital performers

When the experienced performance artists are asked how the field has changed during their career, it is something that occupies Darren O'Donnell a lot. The new generations are changing, and the cultural institutions must think carefully in these years, he believes.

"One of the biggest changes that has happened since I started this type of work in 2006 is that all kids today have artistic production studios in their pockets. And in some cases they have more audiences on their social platforms than some of the more established festivals such as the Vienna Festival. The interesting thing is that in some respects the young people don't need us anymore," says Darren O'Donnell.

He recalls that, just 10 years ago, the incentive for arts organizations to work with young people was to give them a voice, contribute to better self-esteem and offer a platform from which to express themselves: "They don't need us for that anymore, and the picture has really changed. The consequences are that it becomes more difficult to recruit young people to participate in our projects," he explains.

While the cultural institutions are calling for a strategy for involving young people on social media, the new generation is itself more creative than ever

Darren O'Donnell believes that young people nurture friendships through electronic bits, whereas they might have signed up for drama or another social community before. So the irony is that while the cultural institutions are calling for a strategy for involving the young on social media, the new generation itself is more creative than ever, but it also comes at a price:

"What is the value we can add to their lives that they are not getting from their electronic devices? There is a call for organizations to step into a new role in our relationships with young people. A new strategy where we are more responsible as "cultural co-parents" who work with young people as a counterweight to the isolation and loneliness that the digital platforms also seem to create".



Night Walks With Children by Mammalian Diving Reflex in London 2028. Photo: Jalaikon (Carò Gervay)

Cultural organizations in new roles

Darren O'Donnell sees many failed attempts at user involvement: "Festival managers are often excited about the idea of letting teenagers curate the festival, but it's a terrible idea. They have no idea what is possible and just reproduce what has been done before. The organizations can take on a new role by facilitating long-term relationships and reinvesting in face-to-face communities. That's probably what people will be craving soon."

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Henrik Vestergaard says that Live Art Denmark has a desire to move to a more central location in the city in closer cooperation with the local environment: "It depends a lot on the economy, as it is expensive to work community-based because it is time-consuming, but not generates particularly high audience figures. It is a learning process to work more deeply with children, where we can target works to a greater extent for specific groups instead of the short, interactive meetings that should be able to reach everyone."

Ellen Friis adds: "It will be easier to be something for a local environment and can create more life in the store on a daily basis if people can come in and use us directly."



The everyday life of Live Art Denmark. Photo: Lars Vind Andersen

Paradigm shift in participant-based art

As Darren O'Donnell explains, a big shift is happening right now, and it will show what value art institutions can get. It is also up for debate at the seminar during the Horsens Theater Festival this year.

"What do these young people need at this time? How can we help them with psychological problems that social media also causes. It is certainly a big concern," he emphasizes.

The new paradigm calls for equal cooperation between the generations

He believes that a higher degree of participation ethics is needed, which thinks more cross-generationally and with respect for people with disabilities. The new paradigm calls for an equal collaboration between the generations: "We work with so many teenagers, and we are very interested in long-term relationships with young people who deliver projects. The person who will lead *Haircuts by children* in Denmark is someone I have known since he was 12 years old."

Darren O'Donnell says that it is about what each of us can offer in the collaboration. The young people can create content based on their curiosity and questions, while the organizations can offer frameworks, structure and time for authentic, social gatherings that can bring the young people's interests to light.

If you want to go even more in depth with the above, that is the theme of the Professional Forum at Horsens Theater Festival 2024, which will be held on Friday 20 September 11-14.30. See more [here](#) .



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