

European Dancehouse Network

Equity in Dance: What Challenges?

EDN Atelier report by Alexandra Baybutt

La Briqueterie CDCN Val-de-Marne

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Common in the international cultural sector, yet still hard to grasp for many working in the field, the notion of equity encompasses important issues: representation, cultural rights, solidarity...

How can artists and professionals seize the principle of equity in creation, in their relations with the public and in international collaborations? The two-day Atelier, open to artists and cultural professionals, offers a space for discussion, practice and collaborative learning on issues of fairness and solidarity.

[La briqueterie](#) International Development Manager and International Programming Assistant Elisabetta Bisaro welcomed the assembled participants with what to expect over the day and a half. She invited us to please speak from individual experience, and that there is no right or wrong, with no preaching going to take place.

With simultaneous translation from two translators sitting at the back of the room, sociologist **Bérénice Hamidi** presented the keynote, ***Equity, a foreign concept in a country where equality reigns?***, introducing the complexity of the term in the cultural and historical context of France.

Representation in French theatre, on the stage, in the audience and in cultural management came into focus through seminal research in the 1970s. Its questions included: *are people in society represented in the theatre audience, and are people in the theatre audience represented on stage?* The answers were resoundingly 'no', and furthermore, this research was initially silenced for pointing out structural racism and gender discrimination. When made public, it shocked theatre-makers who had the self-perception that their spaces were the epitome of art as a public good and emancipation, when findings suggested that they were far less democratic, and more reflective of antiquity.

As part of this analysis, Bérénice mentions **intersectionality**, the concept introduced by scholar and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw to fine-tune perspective. An intersectional approach to research helps to take into account and better-understand overlapping forms of oppression based upon different aspects of identity and history. How the concept is used varies and is complex given, she argues, a number of controversies based on how inequality is understood in France, and who has a stake in how culture is supported, educated, recruited for and so forth.

The French republican model claims people are free and equal under law, with, as Bérénice puts it, indifference towards differences. Whilst social inequalities need to be understood, the political system cannot be touched. Yet women's right to vote appeared only in 1945 and it is very difficult to integrate women and people of colour in the largely white male republican system.

Bérénice questions the usefulness of the concept of equity as there is a risk, she argues, of how recognising difference at a legal level **risks naturalising differences** (across for example gender, age, ethnicity, dis/ability). Making these differences 'natural' can have the effect of maintaining, rather than challenging, hierarchies of power and access. In the French model of merit and talent, the equity model does not intend to remove all inequalities. Instead, debate about what gets referred to as **'fair and unfair inequalities'**.

The complexities of this relate to how privilege was supposed to have been abolished through the French Revolution (1789-99), and replaced with 'meritocracy'. Whilst **talent** is remarked upon as being a keyword in culture, it is also a key word of the legal model of democratic society, with the political right to get ahead through one's talents.

Bérénice argues that the path to combatting discrimination requires knowledge of the history of cultural policies leading towards what is referred to in France as **'cultural rights'**. This entails the right to 'do' art and not only the right to 'receive' art, and decentres talent (from being at the centre of cultural rights) and instead re-centres those rights around the experience of creating.

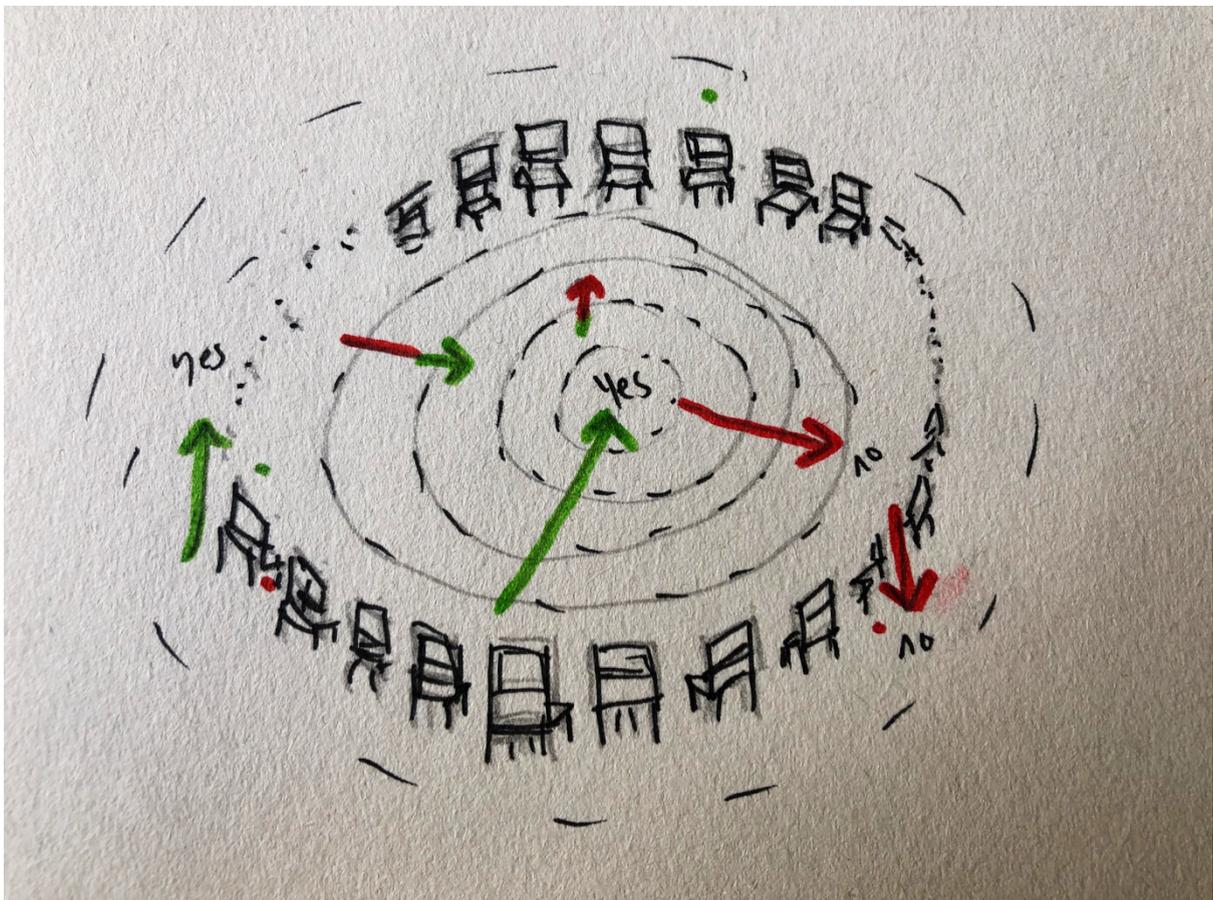
This is an attempt to address the **limits of meritocracy**. Although accepting someone on the basis of individual merit can open up opportunity to more people, it does not adjust for the material socio-economic conditions in which that talent is situated, how it may have been nurtured, or what may help it to continue to develop (e.g. inherited wealth and knowledge). The need to have an adjustable model is emphasised as important as one solution does not work for all.

Bérénice links this to **anarchy** (another term meaning different things in different contexts), and refers to the Karl Marx quote from 1875: *from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs*, related to the free distribution of and access to goods and services.

The discourse of 'cultural rights' is being adopted by institutions, and though is relatively unfamiliar, it shows an important paradigmatic shift in the performing arts in France as new models for discussing access and discrimination have been much needed for producing **emancipatory conditions** for artistic work.

Following this lecture, **Monica Gillette** facilitated a collective reflection ***What does this have to do with me?*** It contrasted sitting and listening with moving, and shifted the spatial organisation of rows of chairs facing the one speaker behind a table with a microphone.

This session engaged and invited physical movement of the individual as part of the group in the context of the room. Reconnecting to body and space was undertaken through open questions and tasks. For example, we were asked to silently arrange the chairs into a more equitable configuration over two minutes. These movement scores supported reflection upon doubts, questions and internal processing. The group was encouraged to respond not only from the perspective of a professional role but also from a personal place. Monica spoke questions aloud. If you would answer 'yes', you would stand in or towards the centre of the circle, and 'no' towards the edge.



Referred to often as **social choreography**, this self-reflexive method allows for seeing oneself in a shifting constellation to and with others. Questions referred to issues mentioned by Bérénice: *'in my local context, the people in the audience reflect the artists on the stage'*, as well as topics such as feelings towards talking about equity, feeling equipped to do so, facing bias, feeling at a disadvantage,

pay, working for free and the ability to do so without compromising one's ability to pay the rent, travel visas, the passport one holds, gender, privileges and affordances.

After a short pause to sense where in the body these questions produced activation, the rules of engagement slightly changed. Instead of travelling towards and away from the centre, we stayed by one's chair. This time 'yes' meant go up, and 'no' meant go down.

Questions related to:

- perceptions of abundance or scarcity of resources in one's local context to have equitable conditions,
- one's position of power,
- one's own ways of defining 'excellence',
- how equity and excellence might co-exist,
- how pay scales might be determined when working internationally,
- parenting and childcare responsibilities,
- working with what was referred to as 'people from the community or amateurs' and their pay,
- if pay should increase with age and experience,
- identity and responsibility about the choices made because of it,
- the identities of those in positions of management,
- wishing one didn't have to perform one's identity,
- whether pronouns should be disclosed,
- and giving more support to artists from the global South.

Questions were then welcomed from anyone in the group, and answering continued with the centre/periphery travelling movement.

The following session for discussion and metabolising, again facilitated by Monica. With the support of several other participants: Chiara Organtini, Connor Schumacher, Mélanie Demers, Fatima N'Doye, Milica Ilic, who took the roles of writers and at times hosts of the conversation.

Notes of ideas and suggestions were taken in the form of 'do' and 'don't' list, as well as where more information was needed. A summary of the process of discussion and some key points were presented back to the whole group at the end.

Equity in creation and production

Connor and Mélanie shared questions of transparency, decision-making and access to information. [Non-violent communication](#) was mentioned as one of the useful tools for working relations. Discussion included whether outsiders might be needed in resolving disputes, or whether it was important for that to be managed

from within. How this appears differently in different cultures follows a useful statement from this group: *'don't assume that you know that they know what we know'*. Other topics included whether open calls for projects are equitable, and what gatekeeping means, how to hold the gate open, and how to give others the key to the gate.

Equity in collaboration

Fatima and Milica in the discussion about 'equity in collaboration' introduced the possibility of a 'don't know' column to include the things in doubt, as the space of doubt is also a space of collaboration. Collaboration was recognised as a dynamic process in which methods and relationships involve ongoing negotiation and renegotiation. The need for trust and dialogue are significant in overcoming misunderstanding and keeping curiosity alive, and the yearning towards common ground requires addressing differences: *'How do I mean what I mean and are we really talking about the same thing?'*.

Equity in relations with the public

Chiara reflected that the notion of 'public' seems wider than 'audience' in useful ways. She commented again how the definitions and interpretations of 'equity' in English differ from the French, so it is useful to speak of equality and equity, and remain aware of the nuances. Looking for institutional change requires self-reflexivity, and there was a suggestion of inviting specialists or mediators, and questioning more broadly who is invited and for what reasons/functions. There was a point about a preference for long-term projects in order to develop relationships, and not to feel like time was being squeezed. The use of public spaces and moving beyond the walls of an institution was mentioned as necessary for reaching different publics. Multiplying strategies for engaging with publics has been occurring through what are sometimes referred to as 'collateral' or 'wrap around' projects. The attitudinal shift suggested is to consider them as equally core to performances, in order to engage further with new and existing publics near and far.

On the second day, **Mélanie Demers** led a workshop in collaboration with Monica Gillette *Here and now or never*. Using tools from Mélanie's creative process, participants address the importance of individual responsibility in a shared context.

Simple **choreographic scores** were characterised by fundamental elements of movement such as breath, gesture, locomotion and pause. These were described as preconditions for conversation and reflection as sensitivity, perception and awareness of oneself and each other can increase through these actions.

Repetition became an important way to address questions and patterns. For example, the opening circle of giving our names and reasons for being here was done three times, and by adding a physical action and dwelling on why 'are you really here', we could hear ourselves and each other become more candid and specific.

Attuning to others and oneself, sharing impulses and finding responsiveness, the group mobilised various configurations in what Mélanie referred to as '*keeping the fire alive*' in the commitment to keeping something going. Whether the movement tasks were familiar or not, layering their complexity became a mirror for **self-reflection**. We were invited to consider sharing, holding on, and letting go of habits and patterns which is fundamental for any change in perception to happen. Discussion included issues around creative agency, invitation and consent.

After lunch **Anikó Rácz** presented [VALUES OF SOLIDARITY The Gamified workshop](#). This Reshape project card game is used as a tool to encourage working groups to discuss the ups and downs of collaboration, values and diversity of opinions.

Small groups sat around tables in another space of la briqueterie and played the game for about an hour and a half in order to work through its stages. First various values, such as 'diversity', 'justice', 'environment' are discussed, then thought about alongside scenarios describing real-world examples where various values have been compromised. The context of the game supports individual stories and experiences to be shared and thought about. Whilst the game was created for international collaborators working together for the first time, it would be supportive for any collaborative working group.

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The last part of the day was a **collective recollection** facilitated by **Yasen Vasilev and Monica Gillette**. Four questions were posed:

- something I learned or was excited by,
- something I want to implement,
- something I want to let go of,
- something I want to question.

The answers were arranged in four quadrants of the space on papers in French and English. Then we were invited to move these ideas and comments to different spaces and configurations, making chains of connection or image.

About the author

Alexandra Baybutt (PhD, RSME, CMA) works in dance professionally since 2004, and engages freelance in postdoctoral research, somatic movement education, and artistic practice in the UK and Europe. In 2023, EDN commissioned Alexandra to map and highlight equitable practices in contemporary dance in Europe:
<https://www.ednetwork.eu/news/equityreport2023>

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