

THE WALL AND THE CIRCLE

by Yasen Vasilev

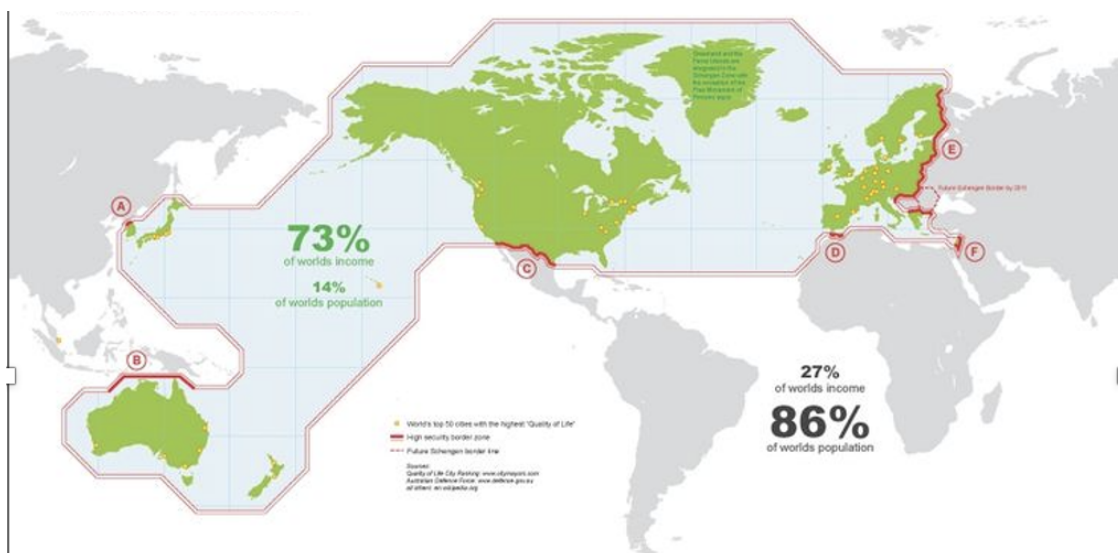
The atelier on equity, co-organized by La Briqueterie and EDN in Paris during the Biennale de Val-de-Marne, aimed at positioning the question of equity (in creation, in collaboration, and in relation with the audience) in the French context where equality has been the dominant principle guiding public life since the French revolution.

The difference between equity and equality is most famously illustrated with an online meme with three people of different height trying to peek over a wooden fence. On the other side of the fence is a playing field and baseball match that they don't have the tickets for, while the seats in the tribunes are full. In "equality" they are stepping each on three equal wooden crate platforms – but because of their differences, some of them are unable to see above the fence. In "equity" the three platforms are redistributed individually to every person's height, so they all get a chance to see the field beyond the fence. The tailor-made situation in equity refers to the anarcho-communist principle "*From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs*".

On the first day of the atelier, in a social choreography session guided by Monica Gillette, we were asked to rearrange the space – a dance studio at La Briqueterie mainly full of chairs and a table with microphones for the simultaneous translation – in an equitable way, without speaking to each other. A perfect circle emerged almost immediately – and for the statements that followed the inside of that circle represented the "yes" and the outside the "no". The statements tackled various aspects of the question of equity: representation in our contexts on stage, in the audience and in leadership positions; checking one's own privileges because of physical abilities, ethnicity, skin color, age, place of birth or passport; identity politics and its contradictions. The only time I found myself outside the circle completely alone was the statement "Sometimes I feel very uncomfortable talking about equity". I stood outside – after all I was supposed to write about it, but I was honestly surprised that everyone else went in and was quite close to the center. What does that mean? Are our conversations held hostage by fear of making a mistake or offending someone? Are we self-censoring because of the positions we take and the institutions we represent? Is being uncomfortable maybe a good thing, a sign for the first step

towards change? I also can't help but wonder, who are we, the people of the circle, in relation to the three people who remain outside peering over the fence?

The picture with the fence which [originated and had its evolution within the internet meme culture](#), seems to hold other questions, emerging out of our collective unconscious. [The fence makes me think of another image](#) – a wall that separates the global north (73% of world's income but 14% of the population) from the global south (27% of world's income, 86% of the population") – my country is in the limbo between the one and the other world, literally a "liminal space", a term so trendy in contemporary dance these days. This wall was not physical throughout the 90s and early 2000s – it was enacted through visas and passports, shock therapy economic policies, cheap labor as a form of competitiveness, public debt, etc. It was invisible and it could be felt only if you were coming from *that* side of the wall. The people in the tribunes watching the game are blissfully unaware of the existence of the wall.



However, in the last decade, following the migrant crisis and the fear it stoked, the shift to the right in the former East, and now the war in Ukraine, it started to fortify. It is literally being extended and erected at this very moment – Finland just joined NATO and is reinforcing its border with Russia, but fences and walls already exist between the Baltic states, Poland and Belarus, between Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey, between Hungary and Serbia and Croatia. According to the Telegraph, these are 1800 km of walls, the equivalent of 12 Berlin walls, with a budget of Frontex, the border agency of the EU, going from 6 to 543 million in 16 years and expected to reach 900 million in 2027.

What does that have to do with dance? The market of contemporary dance is very much connected to this capitalist fortress and its developments, but it covers an even smaller territory, as it is particularly concentrated on part of the European continent, where the remaining of the welfare state is still sustaining it through public subsidies. The lack of public funding in the US makes the production or distribution of contemporary dance works of the type we see across the stages of the members institutions of EDN impossible. In the former Eastern parts of Europe, the field lacks sufficient infrastructure, funding, and networks to compete internationally and be fully integrated in that market. So even within the small European context there are invisible walls and divisions, you can be inside the fortress and outside the circle. If we extend the metaphor and imagine the field of contemporary dance as a circle on the map, where would it be its center and what would it be its radius?

Hungarian artist Julia Vavra addresses these invisible walls in her piece [“Artists like me”](#) (most recently presented at Batard festival at Beursschouwburg in Brussels where the artist is introduced with a mystification biography in which a main point is her relocation to New York City). She pokes fun at the cliches of the conceptual turn in dance (the absurd story of a curator recontextualizing the preparation of bread following a Hungarian grandmother’s recipe as an art performance installation), at the bias and exoticization towards Eastern Europeans (“ah, Hungarians, very interesting, oh, they studied in Amsterdam, Salzburg, Brussels, Berlin – they must be goood”). She makes fun of the local context (“I also want to research and perform in the Performing Arts and Research Training Studios!”) and of the entrepreneurial language which has infiltrated Western universities (by literally reading capitalist slogans from the website of SNDO in Amsterdam). The performance ends with desperate cries “Let me in! Let me in! Let me in!” which are more sad than amusing. The Hungarian nihilistic humor is funny and painful precisely because it’s so true and points the finger at all the pressure points. The line “We love Hungarian artist Marina Abramovic” is probably dedicated to everyone who makes no difference between Budapest and Bucharest (Abramovic is from neither). Orban, who is mentioned in the piece, is only a symptom and product of a structural inequality, very deeply entrenched and well-articulated as [“white but not quite” in this text](#) which traces the shift to the right in the former Communist bloc back to the fact that Eastern Europeans are in a permanent process of catching up with the West but only on the condition of failure. In one of the many reworkings of the image online the skin color of the people left outside darkens – they become brown. In a version probably yet to come the platforms they use to peek into the playing field are digital social media platforms which serve as storefronts presenting all the possible lifestyles for purchase on the other side of the wall/screen.

But it's not only Eastern Europeans who are deprived of access and social mobility – this fate is now reaching the very center of the circle. In a [TransArtists interview](#) with a visual arts expert from the Dutch embassy in Paris, advice is given to international artists who want to come work in France: “Bring a lot of money! No, I'm joking. Learn the language and jump in at a high level, since social mobility is low. Be adventurous.” “Be adventurous” sounds a bit like Dutch housing minister De Jonge responding to a protestor unable to afford buying a house despite having savings, middle class parents and a well-paying job: [“Have you thought about getting a rich boyfriend?”](#). It was only half a joke. What seems to be common knowledge among the experts and what they are telling us through jokes, is that only the naïve still believe in meritocracy or social mobility. With the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state, the rise of the precariat, gig economy and deregulated freelance work, the privatization of education and expansion of debt, the property bubble and housing crisis, the extreme inequality, and tax shelters, and failing pension systems, we are in a complete crisis of the idea of equality.

The three people on the other side of the fence didn't wait for equity policies and affirmative actions from the inside to reach them. Instead, they self-organized, so they can watch the game. As a step beyond critique and towards concrete action, The Values of Solidarity Card Game, co-authored by Aniko Racz, who attended the atelier and introduced the project, is a great tool for self-organization, navigation of conflict and redistribution of responsibilities within a work collective. Within Flanders Arts Institute's project *A Fair New Idea* Belgian writer Wouter Hillaert wrote [a plea for unequal pay](#) as part of his research on Common Income and asymmetrical pay. He proposes to directly implement the principle "*From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs*" in small collective projects, as a resistance to the way things operate on a structural level and as an act of solidarity within work groups. I imagine that these uncomfortable conversations about redistribution and payment can only happen in a small circle with common and clear political positions, like those that can be formed by playing the card game. As the topic of slowing down emerged several times throughout our discussions, I also thought about Brazilian artist Lia Rodrigues who has been working in contemporary dance for years from within a favela of Rio de Janeiro, making use of a different pace outside of the circle where time is not immediately calculated into money.

During our social choreography one statement united everyone inside the circle together: “I often work for free”. I wondered: if this statement is the one that unites us all, if this is the common denominator, then the main principle structuring our circle, and therefore our dance field must be unpaid labor and self-exploitation. Our feelings while stepping in are also worth examining – when we state that we work for free, do we feel pride (of our work ethic and

competitiveness)? Fear (that if we don't, we might not get any other gigs)? Shame (because we have internalized structural problems and experience them as our own faults and failures)? Joy (because we are privileged to not worry about money and deeply love our jobs)? Helplessness (that things are only probably only going to get worse before they get better)? And above all, I asked myself – how come we have normalized this situation to the extent that it does not even make us angry – it is just how things are. [“Dancing their unhappy freedoms”](#), a text written in and about the British context, details all the problems in the dance field today with analytical precision and cruel distance only to conclude that *there is no alternative* but we have to enjoy it like this anyway. A defeatist position coming from the field itself is a symptom of the internalization of capitalist market logic, inability to think progressively, defend the importance of one's own existence or imagine a different future. It was an interesting coincidence that the atelier took place at the same time as the nation-wide strike which mobilized more than million protesters across France, angry with President Macron's proposal to increase retirement age. While we shrugged at the fact that we work for free, people marched, shouted, protested, erected barricades, threw stones at fancy storefronts and police cars, and set garbage bins aflame in the center of Paris.

Austria, home of the largest international contemporary dance festival on the planet, recently proposed that 2-billion-euro EU funds (a sum almost equivalent to the Creative Europe 7-year budget) be allocated for the transformation of the Bulgaria-Turkey border fence into a wall. The Commission refused with the argument that *“fixed infrastructure that keeps people out is a wall to us, whether it's made of bricks or any other material”*, translated in Bulgarian media as *“and the fence is also a wall”*. The circle can also be a wall, as in medieval fortresses. It can also be an echo chamber separated from the outside world and a trap where the radius is constantly shrinking, leaving you with ever less space for action and imagination. From the outside it can be seen as a zone of privilege (by those on the other side of the wall wanting to get in). From the inside it can be experienced as a guarantee for self-exploitation and burnout (by those competing within its walls). CARCASS, the work of Marco Da Silva Ferreira we saw as part of the Biennale of Val-de-Marne, finishes with an inscription *Tous les murs tombent*, as does one version of the equity meme from 2015 which calls for liberation by tearing down the wall. As this statement is a bit too romantic, and made from inside the fortress, I prefer the Mexican t-shirt slogan which mixes humor and resistance from the outside: *Keep calm. You're on the fun side of the wall.*

About the author

[Yasen Vasilev](#) lives between Brussels and Sofia and works in the field of contemporary dance and performance as a dramaturg, critic, and maker. [IMPOSSIBLE ACTIONS](#), an ongoing artistic research trajectory, has been developed and presented internationally in the form of workshops and performances which aim to test and re-imagine the limits of the body. He's a regular contributor for Springback magazine and is active on the topic of working conditions in the frame of different initiatives, most recently Kunstenpunt's A Fair New Idea where he co-authored [a Letter for transnational fair practice](#) in collaboration with Anna Manubens and Pieternel Vermoortel.

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