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Community Arts in our Time of Crises

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Abstract: *This article reflects on multiple crises being negotiated by community arts practitioners in the contemporary moment. Based on reflections on/about the International Community Arts Festival (ICAF) that took place in Rotterdam in March 2026, as well as some of the productions staged under its umbrella, the article contextualises the emergence of the festival as a legacy of Rotterdam's term as European City of Culture. Acknowledging the comparatively recent arrival of the term 'community arts' to the Netherlands, the paper also considers how such arts practices simultaneously function as a mode of societal critique and expressive self-organisation and as a policy projection tied to social programmes that are tasked with delivering impact in 'disadvantaged' communities. Discussions at ICAF 2026 highlighted community arts' possible 'crisis of confidence' in the face of funders' managerialist expectations and the rise of the far right globally. The former has led to the increasing normalisation of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Logic Models in determining purpose and value in the field, while the latter relates to some key tensions inherent to doing participatory, community-led arts work in these populist times. Conversely, this paper also discusses how community arts can be a powerful aesthetic and political vehicle for critically interrogating profound societal questions such as the implications of the climate crisis; inequalities shaping assumptions about the 'migration crisis'; and the crisis of legitimacy impacting on the state and professional agencies in different contexts.*

Keywords: *community arts; International Community Arts Festival; crisis; KPIs, participatory values.*

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What do we mean by community arts, who gets to use the term to describe their artistic practice and under what circumstances does such practice become possible and knowable? Because these are recurring and unresolved questions, they might also appear as redundant, inciting complaints that we have been here before too many times, and that the associated debate gets us nowhere. However, I am convinced that they remain essential and generative questions that allow for recognition of the dynamism, diversity and context specificness that characterises 'community arts', while also urging caution about some of the overly generalising claims that are made about such art's commitments to community participation, cultural democracy, and collective creative processes (see also Garrido Castellano, 2023; Kester, 2004; Matarasso, 2018; Meade and Shaw, 2021; Shaw and Meade, 2013: van Erven, 2013; Whelan and Ryan, 2016). In March 2026 I attended the International Community Arts Festival (ICAF) in Rotterdam. ICAF's eclectic programme incorporates active processes of co-creation; community visits; street performances; workshops where participants make music or move together; discussions of lessons learned from practice, policy and political engagements; and high-concept staged productions. As might be expected from such a diverse line-up, one that attracts participants from across the globe, there is no single or unified message, medium or doctrine that can be taken as representative of the Festival itself. I made choices reflecting my interests and enthusiasms about the workshops I attended and I cannot pretend to have a full overview of everything that fell under its banner. Therefore, this paper is not a review of ICAF 2026: instead, it offers some reflections on the diverse crises being navigated by contemporary community arts based on thinking with/about ideas and experiences I encountered in Rotterdam.

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Contexts, concepts and changing expectations– a crisis of confidence?

As Gerry Mooney (2004) has recorded, with reference to the debate in Glasgow, the designation of cities as 'European Capitals of Culture' has long provoked disputes about the resulting costs and legacies for local people, about whose and what versions of culture prevail, and regarding the societal expectations that can or should be attached to the arts. Given the prevalence of such controversies across the EU, it is notable that ICAF first came into being in 2001 when its home city of Rotterdam was granted City of Culture status. As is evident from its website, it also seeks to be *more* than a festival, identifying as a 'multi-trajectory, international program. We are at once **a digital platform, a global Hub network**, and, every three years, **an international festival**' (ICAF, 2026:n.p. original emphasis).

Although the concept and practice of 'community arts' have been circulating in the UK and Ireland since the 1970s (Kelly, 1984; Fitzgerald, 2004) - where earlier incarnations were often but not exclusively linked to counter-cultural politics or to social and community-based movements for change - the expression itself did not have the same profile or purchase in the Netherlands. Dutch community theatre practitioner and theorist, Eugene van Erven (2015:407), a former artistic director of ICAF, observes that 'the term "community arts" entered the Netherlands around the turn of the new millennium', when an Arts Council representative encountered it 'on a trip to England and introduced it to our country in conjunction with the equally problematic term "social inclusion" and without being aware of its diminishing status in Britain'. These comments evoke significant tensions within and around community arts internationally; how it simultaneously functions as a mode of societal critique and expressive self-organisation *and* as a policy projection that is tied to social programmes that are, in turn, tasked with delivering impact in 'areas of disadvantage' or among

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peoples classed as 'excluded'. For community members, there are significant ontological differences between self-constituting as active cultural/democratic subjects and being constituted as objects of policy intervention. Furthermore, reflecting on the wider implications of policy makers' engagement with community arts, Francois Matarasso (2018:166) warns of the power and prevalence of 'conceptual institutionalisation' whereby funders expect that work will take shape 'in ways and within boundaries that are acceptable' to them (also Whelan and Ryan, 2016).

Dialogue about such tensions and how they are negotiated was central to the ICAF programme. A session intriguingly entitled 'the Hardcore Club' was led by a panel of speakers from Junction Arts (Derbyshire), Citizens Theatre (Glasgow), Drama Box (Singapore), Stut Theater (Utrecht) and Rotterdam's Wijktheater. Coined by Eugene van Eerven, here 'Hardcore' refers to arts praxis that is deeply embedded in community contexts and where communities exercise authority and ownership over the substance, form and transmission of the work produced, while collaborating with professional artists and facilitators. Discussants reflected on their organisations' long histories and on the power of their aesthetic and social contributions to the cultural life of their areas. But, as the conversation developed and involved the audience, there was acknowledgement of community arts' lost radicalism, of the need to reimagine ways of working in the face of the online world's displacement of neighbourhood and place, and of the changing textures and meanings of belonging in everyday community life.

Questions were posed about the rise of the far right, and its implications for a democratic vision of arts practice. If, and as more, communities seemingly embrace exclusionary, racist and anti-migrant worldviews, what kinds of stories might they want to

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share with the world? The appeal to participatory values in both community arts and community development seems to presume that an ultimate symmetry between the politics of workers/facilitators and those of community members is possible and even probable; but in truth, those values are contested and fragile (Meade, 2009; Ife, 2020). How confident can we be that a progressive vision of/from community arts can survive contact with an increasingly expansive politics of suspicion and ressentiment? For contributors to the ICAF discussion, and as Gary Fraser (2025) and Jim Ife (2020) acknowledge, simplistic invocations of 'community voice' are not sufficient for these populist times: participatory praxis means recognising the difficulty but necessity of forging dialogue and deliberation in the face of anger, polarisation and skewed power relationships.

Other changes are generating crises of confidence in community arts practice. There is a sense that funders' managerialist demands and resistance to 'risk' are eroding opportunities for autonomy and experimentation; a mundane tyranny of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Logic Models. Listening to this discussion, I remembered the enforced roll-out of KPIs in Ireland during the post-crash transformation of community development (Power, 2014) and community workers' frustrations at the state's demands for pre-emptive knowability about a praxis that should, by definition, be open-ended and somewhat unpredictable. Community arts practitioners in this session could remember a time when 'change' or 'outcomes' did not need to be prescribed in advance, but such memories may be receding as new generations of community members and workers experience a funding landscape where KPIs are entirely normalised, constituting the very stuff of purpose and recorded value (see Whelan and Ryan, 2016).

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Productions and/or Processes? What art can say

Unsurprisingly, there were opportunities for collective making and doing at ICAF 2026. For example, in a day-long workshop, facilitated by Ruth Ben-Tovim called *Town Anywhere: Rehearsing the Future,* there were opportunities to build a city out of cardboard, string, paper, tape, branches, markers and other bits and bobs. We were guided through a layered process that moved from individual to small group to whole workshop levels of involvement, as we imagined the ideas, ambitions, and structures that could define a city in 2036. Architecture that could accommodate deliberative self-government and arts practice; spaces for play, fun and the collective growing and eating of food; institutions that would enable skill-sharing, community education and the actualisation of rights; these articulated a non-negotiable solidarity that contrasts with the real world's retrenchment of the social state or what Craig Gilmore and Ruth Wilson Gilmore call 'organised abandonment' (Gilmore, 2022). Signing up for the workshop, I had various ideas about what I might contribute to such a session, but was surprised to find myself preoccupied on the day with thoughts of algorithms, online data and tech monopolies, the unaccountability and extractivism on which they are founded, and I worked with others towards the creation of what we designated a 'democratic data centre'. My surprise at where this prefigurative workshop took me was a reminder of the alchemical, unsettled and unsettling character of good community arts processes; how they help us come to know our own minds in and through our collaborations with others.

However, many other ICAF events and activities were experienced from the positionality of audience member or spectator. There were impressive productions, watched by hundreds of people, and performed on the kind of theatre stage that will never become available to most community groups or projects. And, of course, facilitating and securing this

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kind of wider, international public exposure is a real achievement for both ICAF and the artists/performers. Declan McGonagle (2007:426) has argued that 'the sustained marginality of community arts practice' has been at least partly determined by its failure 'to access the means of distribution', i.e. 'those key organizational and institutional mechanisms, galleries, theatres…which not only provide public experience of the arts, but also validation for arts activity'. But if/when this transition into the institutions occurs, conceptions of quality, value and worth change too as productions are encountered by 'consumers' who know little or nothing about the collective and participatory processes behind them. Unless audiences are afforded insights into those distinctive approaches to production, and why they matter, the art may be experienced as 'issue-based', 'political' or even 'socially engaged', but not necessarily as expressing 'community'. At ICAF 2026 some of the large-scale productions ran workshops where they discussed their praxis in depth, otherwise it might not have been obvious if and how they were community-led. Does this matter? Perhaps not, if our register of value centres on entertainment, provocation, professionalism, and reach. But the wider project of cultural democratisation is inhibited if we cannot learn about the *howness* and *whyness* of the work's coming together.

Productions were strongly attuned to the multiple, interlocking crises of our times and demonstrated the eloquence with which artistic form and aesthetic devices can capture complex societal dynamics. *An Fara* (it has begun) – an expression from Kaduna in Northern Nigeria that warns of coming threats – was primarily a dance piece but it embraced other media too as it evoked the impending and already evident consequences of climate change in Africa. How is it possible that, through their movements across the stage, dancers can convey aspects of ecocide, drought, species loss and militarised violence? Companhia Nova de Teatro's

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Apátridas (Stateless) was performed by four actors from Brazil and Angola. Adopting from the Greek myths the names Cassandra, Hecuba, Prometheus and Hercules, their individual monologues confronted the demonisation and criminalisation of migration today. Together they rejected conventional constructions of a 'migration crisis', to highlight instead various 'crises of inequality', how displacement is enforced through authoritarianism, militarism, the destruction of life-worlds, and the persistence of (neo)-colonialist asymmetries of power across the world-system.

Community Arts About and Against the Crises of Legitimacy

Finally, I want to end this paper with some thoughts on another crisis that was exposed and challenged by contributors to ICAF. Exemplified by the Dutch (Childcare) Benefits Scandal, that came to light in 2018, it relates to loss of trust in the caring professions and institutions of the welfare state, a 'crisis of legitimacy' exacerbated by their lack of trust in the integrity and dignity of welfare 'subjects'. As Arts and van den Berg (2025:178) explain, 'One of the largest public and political scandals in recent Dutch history' it 'concerns at least 35,000 parents of young children that were wrongfully accused of committing fraud with benefits that were to compensate for childcare costs'. Parents were required to 'pay back' all benefits received, amounting to thousands of euros, within impossibly short time frames. The scandal resulted from a cocktail of anti-fraud rhetoric, get-tough policy, institutional racism, and the deployment of algorithmic 'detection' tools that targeted people with supposedly 'non-Dutch' surnames, lone parents and residents of certain postcodes. The processes of recognition, restitution and redress for victims are ongoing, but impacted parents lost livelihoods, homes, liberty and in some cases their children. Along with the minsters and government departments responsible for rolling-out the policy, judges, social workers and police contributed to the *de facto*

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criminalisation of the parents involved. In the ICAF workshop *Theatre as an Institutional Mirror*, we heard how Rotterdam's Wijktheater was initially approached by victims of the scandal with a view to accessing a place to meet. Over a three-year period relationships deepened, leading to the co-creation of theatre pieces that articulated parents' experiences, frustrations and grief about their treatment by the welfare system. Since then, the play has travelled the Netherlands, and it has been performed in parliament and local government contexts. The scandal robbed parents of their agency, but participants reclaimed it somewhat though their enactment of ownership over the theatre pieces, their form and contents. A play can never unravel injustice on such a scale, but community arts processes like this are powerful in their cultivation and demonstration of solidarity; in their exposure of oppressive state apparatuses; and in their movement between and conjoining of ideas and affect, individual narratives and collective struggles, despair and possibility.

Highlighting a crisis of legitimacy that centres on psychiatric 'care' the Catalonian production *Eucaristia* effects the kind of on-stage liberation of minds, bodies and language that upends hegemonic understandings of the mental illness/wellbeing dyad. The artistic company BROTS involves actors who live or have lived with psychiatric diagnoses. *Eucaristia* draws on their personal experiences to highlight the dehumanisation, violence and damage that results from institutional and professional domination over societal responses to mental distress. That it does so through the embrace of humour, absurdity and oblique interactions with vegetables, renders this production profoundly radical in form and intent. There are few concessions to normative sense-making, and no pleas for inclusion or a bit more understanding. The production effects a kind of 'Mad Pride' in 'Mad Knowledge' actively rebutting societal stigma and the (potential) sympathy of the audience. But it also skewers other institutional dynamics

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and disciplinary techniques. At the end of the play, we are prevented from leaving before we have completed the obligatory 'evaluation form' – another routinised measurement of art's impact and outcomes. But in this case, the questionnaire reads like a surrealist text. And when evaluations are completed and returned, out come the performers who proceed to shred them before reading, right before our eyes. It's an illustration of something that doesn't always happen when we focus on lived experience; how recognition of one site of power and domination can inspire sensitivity to others; how diverse critiques and resistances can be articulated together at the same time. *Eucaristia*, which means communion, seems like a most appropriate name for this production and all that it stands for, a worthy ambition for community arts in this time of crisis.

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