JORIS JANSSENS

Changing the Game: The RESHAPE Transition

METHOD

T his publication shares the reflections and insights obtained by the RESHAPE project with the broader art world and the communities where the arts and artists are engaged. But where do we start? Take a first glance and flip through the book. Have a look at the 'Zeitgeist' texts, to get an idea of the diversity and the complexity of issues – this 'sense of deep systemic crisis', as one of the 'Zeitgeist' texts puts it (O'Connor, 2020) – that the RESHAPE community has engaged with. And please acquaint yourself with the proposals developed by the five working groups, and see how diverse they are. At first glance, some of these proposals may seem dense and hermetic. After a longer and harder look, however, the similarities and commonalities between these diverse proposals might catch your attention. What are these prototypes all about? What issues do they want to tackle, and what approaches do they propose? What is the meaning and what are the values underlying these ideas? How might they ultimately infuse the arts ecosystem across Europe and the southern Mediterranean? What might their policy implications be?

This text is a first attempt to join the dots between the proposals, to draft the initial contours of a framework for understanding them. To understand the proposals, it can be useful to first have a brief look at the origins and the promise of RESHAPE, and how the project itself was redesigned and reshaped during an intensive process within the RESHAPE community. Secondly, we begin a reflection on how these proposals might contribute to responding to the current needs within the art field. In very different ways, these proposals respond to increasing pressures concerning how the arts are organised, governed, and supported (or not).

Looking for solutions, they tell us that tweaking the knobs will not suffice. They are calling for a total paradigm shift, for a transition. Through their work, the Reshapers are holding a mirror up to the art world, raising critical questions. They present us with an idea of what we in the arts should all stop doing. They break down, but they also build up. Through speculative, playful and poetic strategies, they also help us to imagine and experience what a new, more sustainable and value-based future for the arts in Europe and the southern Mediterranean might look like. These prototypes are an invitation, a proposal to connect to a process that has only just begun, and which needs a much broader base and new partnerships to become a real transition towards a more sustainable future for the arts ecosystem in Europe and the southern Mediterranean.

The promise of RESHAPE

RESHAPE is a project developed by a partnership of 19 intermediary art organisations, supported as a 'large-scale cooperation project' with a grant from the European Commission. In their missions, histories, contexts, and funding structures, RESHAPE's partner organisations are widely diverse. But they have one thing in common: they all assume a collective responsibility towards the future development of the arts. All have engaged in RESHAPE out of a desire to step into an exploratory trajectory that would allow them to jointly tackle some of the most urgent and complex issues facing the arts.

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When these organisations started to discuss a possible collaboration, they felt they needed something other than a 'single topic' project. By 2015, the pressures within the art field had been mounting for some time. The system was becoming more competitive and pressures on artists, art workers, and institutions were mounting. It also became increasingly clear that these 'art world problems' were interlinked with profound shifts in the broader societal context. The years 2014 and 2015 saw the refugee crisis and the rise of 'illiberal' democracies and populist politics throughout Europe. The prospect of European disintegration began to emerge. The year 2016 was also the year of Brexit and the American elections, with their promise of economic protectionism and exclusive nationalism. Assumptions about the self-evident value of international mobility and the contribution of the arts to society had lost their innocence.

Reflections and debates concerning these pressures and complexities were taking place in the arts all across Europe and the southern Mediterranean. Artists, art workers, and art organisations engaged in experiments seeking answers or interesting approaches. There were more and more radical experiments with innovative potential for the entire arts ecosystem. But these were often developed in marginalised circumstances, under the institutional radar. Completely consistent with the hyped-up pace of an accelerated art world, these exchanges were mostly limited to one-off encounters: very inspiring, but with a short shelf life.

The basic promise of RESHAPE was to strengthen the innovators: the artists and art workers working mainly outside the often-compromised conditions of established art institutions. The wish was that a diverse community – consisting of both intermediary partners and on-the-ground actors – would join forces and share resources beyond the hierarchies and power structures. The promise was that the actors on the ground had the expertise to imagine change. The institutions could share some of their resources and capacities to provide space and time to connect and collaborate. As intermediaries, they also had access to the decision-makers to push those imagined solutions higher up the agenda. This way, these emerging experiments could be connected, made visible, and possibly become mainstream.

In a nutshell, RESHAPE wanted to create a shared space where artists and institutions would co-create the development of future working models. It would do so in what we refer to as Europe and the southern Mediterranean. This area is larger and more diverse than the European Union, which is the horizon for many international projects. Broadening the geographical scope was a deliberate political choice. From the start, RESHAPE affirmed that, as cultural actors, Europe and the southern Mediterranean should be our shared social, political, and cultural environment. This is often not yet the case. But what would happen to our reflections, assumptions, solidarities, and responsibilities if we started seeing this broader region more as 'our' jointly shared, common space?

A bottom-up research and development process

In order to deliver the promise of RESHAPE, a two-year research & development trajectory was designed: a bottom-up process, engaging a diverse group of artists and art workers, which would lead to possible approaches towards a paradigm shift.

By way of an open call, RESHAPE would scout for and identify initiatives from all over Europe and the southern Mediterranean with proven track records in experimenting with alternative working models for the arts. Next, the project would bring them together and provide space and time to work. Five focus topics were defined in advance: 'Art and Citizenship', 'Fair Governance Models', ' Value of Art in Social Fabric', 'Solidarity Economies' and 'Transnational / Postnational Artistic Practices'. Five groups of eight Reshapers were given carte blanche to explore and redefine these topics and to produce 'prototypes': realistic, concrete and sustainable proposals that respond to some of the sector's challenges. The partners pledged to take those results and use their positions and intermediaries to promote them with the sector and policy makers.

On 1 April 2019, it all began in earnest. In Lublin, in the east of Poland, approximately a hundred people (artists, art workers, intermediaries, funding agencies, and so on) from 26 countries came together for the inaugural RESHAPE Forum. The forty Reshapers were there, as well as the consortium partners, together with keynote speakers and an audience of interested parties. After the introduction of the why and the methodology, the five RESHAPE groups embarked on their respective journeys. They started getting to know each other. During a first series of workshops organised all across Europe and the southern Mediterranean, they collectively explored the topics and connected them to their own experiences in a diversity of contexts.

In these meetings, the Reshapers worked mostly in their separate groups. From the start, they insisted on having closed discussions in a safe environment. But their work did not proceed in a vacuum. During the workshops, the Reshapers connected with local artists and activists. For the groups themselves, spending time with the communities hosting the workshops and witnessing their resilience and generosity gave added strength. At the Cluj Intensive meeting (November 2019), the five groups came together for the first time to exchange information about their progress and explore the interconnections between their respective work, ideas, and concerns. Immediately, the interconnections became clear. Meanwhile, what was happening in the world gave the groups plenty of food for thought. Rising xenophobia, racism, nationalism, homophobia, and climate change all increased the urgency of their work.

The Covid-19 pandemic proved a pivotal moment for the process. The first wave of Covid-19 struck nearly one year after the process began in Lublin. Shortly before the Zagreb Intensive meeting (second week of March 2020), the health situation grew worse. The RESHAPE community collectively decided that all public activities (keynote speakers, artist dinners, city walks, and so on) would be cancelled and that the meeting would be reshaped as a 'remote' conference.

The situation added to the urgency of the discussions within the respective trajectories and the project as a whole. Some of the groups had already been experimenting with how they could use digital tools to meaningfully engage, connect, and collaborate. Of course, the virus accelerated this process. The group working on Post- or Transnational Artistic Practices, for instance, saw the irony of the situation. Mobility, which had been taken for granted, had come to a halt in the lockdown. Would this crisis help us rethink our notions of mobility? With increased urgency, this group continued to explore meaningful ways to connect without meeting physically. After Zagreb, they continued to explore digital tools. They also looked back at old archetypes and developed rituals for connecting, anchoring, and healing.

In the eyes of the Fair Governance group, the Covid-19 crisis urged us all to be flexible, agile, and able to respond to quickly changing circumstances. But how does one actually make fair and equitable decisions? In the Covid-19 situation, this group saw an opportunity for RESHAPE: a chance to better understand how to work together and make decisions together. And indeed, the remote Zagreb Intensive meeting was the start of a process where the community *as a whole* collectively started to make strategic decisions. Cancelling the meeting was the first decision made collectively by the entire community. After that, other collective decisions followed, concerning the timeline of the project, reallocation of the budget for travel grants, editorial discussions on the publication, and so on. Through these decisions, a RESHAPE community truly began to form.

Meanwhile, the groups persevered, and reached the point where they needed to make decisions. Which urgent topics should they focus on? What prototypes would they develop? Some groups had difficulty finding common ground and overcoming their internal differences. Some eventually split up and took different directions, which added to the diversity of the proposals now presented in this book. And indeed, the prototypes and the proposals developed by the Reshapers and gathered in this publication are quite diverse. Looking at the process may provide an initial framework for understanding the prototypes, but the more fundamental question is: what do they contribute? What position do they take in terms of the crises the arts ecosystem is facing? How can they help create a fairer future?

The RESHAPE transition

However diverse they are, the prototypes and proposals in this book all start from the shared acknowledgement of a fundamental and deep crisis, which is manifest in broader society and in the art world. Current practices in the art world are no longer felt to be sustainable. This is not only the result of external pressures; it has to do with dominant practices and cultures within the art world itself.

Take mobility, for instance. Some artists and art workers are forced to be hyper-mobile in an increasingly competitive system, while others feel isolated. This is not only because of factors external to the art world (lack of funding, geopolitical circumstances, visa problems, and so on). It is also related to the

mentality and exclusive organisation within the arts: a lack of recognition, lack of knowledge and understanding of the aesthetics and developments in some places, the stereotyping filter and exoticism of the 'Western gaze', and many other factors.

Or consider the situation of artists and art workers: overworked and underpaid in a production system that runs on the precariousness of the most vulnerable people working in it, on extracting benefits from them. Artists and art workers are exhausted, have gone into survival mode. Space for change and development – on a personal, institutional and systemic level – is scarce. All too often, cultural policies and dominant programmes, formats and working models within the arts are a part of the problem. A system that values highly visible products via large events and festivals and mainly project-based financing may support artists in the short term, but in the long term, they ensure the problems persist.

And what about the work culture in many art organisations? Think of institutional practices where permanent staff are being outsourced and replaced by freelancers. Think of hierarchies, lack of diversity, elitism, and lack of leadership and trust. Think of policy systems where the arts are instrumentalised and funding decisions are politicised. Throughout Europe and the southern Mediterranean, there are cases of censorship, limitations of freedom of speech, oppression, incarceration of artists, activists, and those engaging within communities.

These are just some of the topics the Reshapers have engaged with. The crisis is urgent and deep. Again, small systemic adjustments – just tweaking the proverbial knobs – is not enough. All the groups in RESHAPE have demonstrated their wish to contribute to a more ambitious paradigm shift. This should certainly lead to more sustainable and value-based practices in the art world. Innovative solutions developed through the imaginations of artists and art workers may also inspire those outside the arts who are facing similar problems.

Thanks to the work done in the different working groups, a vision starts to emerge of how this more sustainable future for the arts in society might look. RESHAPE is basically about a transition towards a world where artists and art workers are empowered because fair practice and collaboration prevail, become the dominant mentality. Empathy, equity, equality, ecological awareness, diversity, solidarity, security, and (artistic) commitment: all of these will be the guiding values within art institutions and in an alternative economy based on sharing resources, on commons, de-growth, inclusiveness, and respect for broader ecologies and ecosystems. This new world will acknowledge the fundamental role played by the arts, infusing it with magic.

In this new world, artists and art workers will have stopped 'playing the game', as it was expressed during one of the RESHAPE exchanges. They will have stopped being competitive and overly efficient, performing constantly, and doing more in less time. They will have stopped contributing to the extractivist capitalism of a competitive art market. They will have stopped allowing themselves to be exploited. They will say no to the 'festivalisation' of culture, the exclusive pursuit of productivity, to gentrification, and speculation on the art market.

But how do we get to this new world, when the current reality is so bleak? What does the transition process look like, as it moves away from our unsustainable situation and towards this empathic, solidary, and mindful future? How do we organise this process? The prototypes in this book provide us with possible approaches to how to work on this transition. In general, they present us with two complementary angles. Some are about breaking down, while others are about building up.

Some of the proposals hold up a mirror to the art world, raising critical questions and stimulating self-reflection. They urge us to dismantle persistent habits that keep us locked in the 'old' paradigm. Here, we see the Department of Civil Imagination's plea to *unlearn* and to be *deviant* and *disobedient*, as an invitation to self-reflection on the parts of cultural institutions. The Value of Art in Social Fabric group's prototype model for a 'house' is also intent on breaking something down. All the rooms in the house contain a cannonade of critical questions, raising awareness about unsustainable practices which ultimately lead to a lack of recognition for the value of artistic work in society. Here, we can also situate the Fair Governance Models group's proposal as a form of critique on current modes of governance and decision-making processes. They invite us to break down our persistent habits, such as barriers to entry and other forms of exclusion. The Solidarity Economies group's proposals are ultimately aimed at breaking down inequalities by redistributing resources in a fairer way. Giving up privilege is an essential point here.

Other proposals help us to imagine and experience the vision of new, more sustainable and value-based future art practices for the arts ecosystem in Europe and the southern Mediterranean, by way of speculative, playful, and poetic strategies. We can see them as 'pre-enactments'. What most of them have in common is the firm choice for fiction, for play, for working the metaphor, for the imagination in this process towards more sustainable practices. The Department of Civil Imagination encompasses 'the invitation for civil imagination that we really need', a framework that could help unlock this imagining of how change can happen, a 'playful reclaiming of civil and cultural power and possibility'. The Value of Art in Social Fabric group's 'home' is a metaphoric place where revolutions might start.

Another key concept in many proposals is connectedness and collaboration. The Transnational / Postnational Artistic Practices group's rituals and archetypes are a strategy to stimulate exchange and connectedness in an intuitive way. The Solidarity Economies group is not only concerned with breaking down privilege, but also with recognition and acknowledgement. Their 'ArtBnB' is aimed at sharing resources and creating connections, while The Gamified Workshop Toolkit brings solidarity into focus in a playful, gamified way.

Imagination, speculation, poetry, and playfulness on the one hand, and collaboration and connectivity on the other: these are the consistent threads running through all the different prototypes and proposals. It is no coincidence that many proposals take the shape of a game. RESHAPE is not only about not playing the game any longer. Most importantly, it is about *changing the game*. And it invites you to join.

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Indeed, dear reader, this leads us to the point where you step in. This sustainable future is not yet at hand. The present situation can be confusing and chaotic. The work done so far in RESHAPE may give us a glimpse of what a more sustainable and fairer future for the arts in Europe and the southern Mediterranean might look like. But the transition cannot be done by the Reshapers alone, nor by the partners in the consortium. It can only happen when these ideas multiply, go viral and form a movement. The development phase of RESHAPE has led to a set of prototypes – which are basically just an invitation to step into this transition process, with all the resources and capacities you have at hand. If you share the Reshapers' collective vision of this more empathic and solidary future for the arts, there is a simple way to contribute. Join the journey and work the metaphor. Unlock your imagination and play this changed game.

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References

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