

Precarization in the Name of Freedom Material Conditions for Early Independent

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ABSTRACT

This article is written within the frame of the interdisciplinary research project “Expansion and Diversity: Digitally Mapping and Exploring Independent Performance in Gothenburg 1965–2000”. It contributes to the critical ambition of producing an inclusive historiography of local independent performing arts groups by exploring the municipal distribution of cultural grants and the material conditions in the field. Based on interviews with nine well-known members of early independent performing arts groups in Gothenburg, complemented with archived funding applications and news articles, the article uses a cultural studies perspective to elaborate on how artistic freedom was negotiated in relation to dependence on public funding.

KEYWORDS

independent performing arts, expansion period, material cultural policies, governmental precarization, interdependency

Precarization in the Name of Freedom

Material Conditions for Early Independent Performing Arts Groups in Gothenburg

Introduction

It's a rainy Sunday afternoon in mid-February 2020, just before twilight, and we arrive at Ateljé 303 of Konstepidemin, an artists' studio complex in Gothenburg. Our colleague, dramatist and researcher Fia Adler Sandblad, has invited performing artists who worked in the physical theatre tradition in Gothenburg during the 1970s–1990s to a public meeting. When the door is finally opened so that the audience can enter the venue, the warmth of the air is striking. In a fairly small room, a group of approximately 20 people are talking, greeting each other, hugging, and drinking coffee. The artists have hung pictures from different productions on the walls above signs with the names of their groups. The atmosphere is cosy and friendly. When the event starts, everyone, including the audience, sits down on chairs in a circle. For one and a half hours the artists present themselves and share their experiences and reflections on what many of them refer to as “the pioneer years”. As we watch them and listen to them, it feels as if the press coverage and funding applications from the archives that we are studying have suddenly come to life around us.¹

This article uses a cultural studies approach, setting out to infuse sociological perspectives into the research field of independent performing arts (hereinafter IPA), which is dominated by perspectives from the humanities. Hence, it aims to complement analyses of artistic practices, genres, and expressions in IPA with elaborations on the material conditions of the field. The analysis also adds historical perspectives to work-life research on the performing arts, which otherwise primarily deals with the current situation.² Our mixed data contain both ethnographic interviews and fieldnotes, as well as archival material such as funding applications and local newspaper articles. Theoretically, we primarily draw from Michel Foucault's and Pierre Bourdieu's seminal work on the relation between freedom and resistance and the nature of the field of cultural production, as well as more recent writing by Angela McRobbie and Isabell Lorey on passionate work, self-exploitation, and governmental precarization in the cultural sector.³ With a focus on the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, we investigate how early IPA groups negotiated the tension between freedom of expression, which was the dominant ideal expressed by our interviewees, and dependence on public funds.

The Independent Performing Arts in Sweden

In Swedish theatre history, 1965 to 2000 is often referred to as the “expansion period”, and

1 Physical theatre was a common genre among the early independent performing arts groups, which is why Fia Adler Sandblad organized the workshop as part of our research project. See also Callery 2001.

2 Flisbäck & Lund 2010; Miscevic 2014; Lindström 2016.

3 Foucault 1982; Bourdieu 1993; Lorey 2015; McRobbie 2016.

is understood as a time of the rise and establishment of the IPA field. In an official Swedish government report on cultural policies from 1972, the notion of “free groups”, which is what IPA groups are commonly referred to as outside academia, is already an established concept.⁴ IPA groups defied the institutional theatres, left the traditional stages, organized in non-hierarchical ways, worked in process, and often addressed current political issues in their artistic work.⁵ As the title communicates, the aim of our research project “Expansion and Diversity: Digitally Mapping and Exploring Independent Performance in Gothenburg 1965–2000” is to produce an expanded and diversified historiography of the local IPA field in Gothenburg, which has previously most often been presented with a focus on a small number of well-known groups.⁶ By recognizing the complex interrelations and interdependencies, referring not only to aesthetic factors but also to the social, political, and economic conditions, this article contributes to the critical historiographical ambition of the project.⁷ In collaboration with the Centre for Digital Humanities,⁸ an open access research platform covering over 300 Gothenburg-based groups and constellations has been constructed. It includes not just political theatre groups, professional dance groups, physical theatre groups, and IPA groups playing for young audiences, but also carnivals, migrant cultural organizations, jazz dance societies, and slapstick performers.⁹

The Swedish Model for Cultural Policies

Since the post-war period, the Nordic countries have shared a view of cultural policies as an essential part of welfare policies. In Harry Hillman Chartrand and Claire McCaughey’s classical model of four cultural policy ideal types, the Nordic version mainly resembles the *Architect* type, defined by its inclusive enlightenment and democracy ideals.¹⁰ In addition to the development of high-quality art and culture marked by artistic freedom, which is central in the *Patron* type, Swedish cultural policies have also focused on accessibility, participation, and the idea that art and culture ought to affect societal development.¹¹ In the abovementioned official report from 1972, IPA groups are highlighted as important for the achievement of the goals of reaching new audiences and widening the public debate.¹² In Gothenburg’s municipal cultural program from 1973, IPA groups are valued mainly for their direct forms of communicating with the public, making social contact, and creating activities for everyone.¹³ The political governing tool for artistic freedom in the *Patron* policy type, “the arm’s length principle”, entails that politicians decide only on the budget for culture, and then leave it to independent bodies consisting of experts to decide on how the funds should be distributed. To a fairly high degree this resembles how, since 1974, the Swedish Arts Council has been tasked to process and decide on national cultural grants for IPA groups. However, as will be highlighted in this article, grants at the municipal level in Gothenburg have been distributed by a cultural committee consisting of politicians from all parties in the municipal assembly.¹⁴

4 Forser 2007, 428.

5 Wirmark 1976; Appelgren 1977; Fornäs 1985; Ringby 1995; Granath 1997; von Malmberg 2002; Wahlgren 2003; Johansson 2006.

6 The leader of the project is Astrid von Rosen. Further information is available at <https://www.gu.se/en/research/expansion-and-diversity-digitally-mapping-and-exploring-independent-performance-in-gothenburg-1965-2000>

7 Brauneck 2017; Davies & Marx 2020; see also Mattson 2018.

8 Further information is available at <https://www.gu.se/digital-humaniora>

9 Further information is available in Swedish at <https://expansion.dh.gu.se/>

10 Hillman Chartrand & McCaughey 1989. The four ideal types in Hillman Chartrand and McCaughey’s model are the *Facilitator* (e.g., the USA), the *Patron* (e.g., the UK), the *Architect* (e.g. the Nordic countries), and the *Engineer* (e.g., the Soviet Union)

11 Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy and Analysis 2022. See also Johannisson 2006; Harding 2007; Frenander 2010; Karlsson 2010.

12 SOU 1972:67, 196.

13 Gothenburg Municipal Assembly 1973, 3.

14 For more detailed discussions on cultural policies on performing arts, see for example Blomgren & Blomgren 2002 and Hoogland 2005.

CULTURAL STUDIES OF INDEPENDENT PERFORMING ARTS

Theoretical Framework

In the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies, the links between culture, politics, and the economy are central issues.¹⁵ In this theoretically eclectic academic space, we follow our two main contemporary references, Angela McRobbie and Isabell Lorey, in drawing from the theoretical concepts of both Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. One of the main references in our analyses of the material conditions in the local field of IPAs is Foucault, who describes *power relations* as changeable¹⁶ and manifested between “free subjects” that have various possibilities to react and resist.¹⁷ Following our ethnographic methodology, we focus on manifestations of power that influence a person’s actions and attitudes in everyday life.¹⁸ In her research on working conditions in the contemporary fashion industry, McRobbie discusses this form of power in terms of *the creative dispositif*, and shows how this governmental instrument encourages young people to embark on insecure creative careers.¹⁹ We have mapped the power relations within the cultural field by identifying social effects of various practices rather than their meaning.²⁰ In our analysis of the local funding applications process, we have concentrated on the relation between the intentions expressed by the authorities and the effects that their decisions generated for IPA groups. We have also been interested in how the process implicitly disrupts or sustains power relations.²¹ In his work on *the field of cultural production*, Bourdieu describes the artistic field as striving towards autonomy.²² Our analysis deals with the different levels of autonomy in relation to economic and political factors, and the way this, referred to as “freedom”, was perceived by the artists whom we interviewed.

According to Bourdieu, the cultural field works like an “economic world reversed”, based on a *romanticized* idea of the artist as disinterested in profit.²³ McRobbie argues that the working rhythm of artists as shaped by this view provides a model for various careers in the current neoliberal era, characterized by passionate work, creativity, self-employment, and freelancing. Throughout her book, she describes the flip side of this model in terms of precarious working conditions, insecurity, and sporadic incomes.²⁴ In a similar vein, Lorey introduces the concept of *governmental precarization* in order to problematize the complex interactions between the instruments of governing, the conditions of economic exploitation, and the modes of subjectivation.²⁵ McRobbie captures the essence of the third pillar in Lorey’s model (the modes of subjectivation) as she elaborates on the paradox by which the individual “is promised freedom (to self-actualize) while also being subjugated to the normalization (and privatization) of risk and uncertainty”.²⁶

In order to identify the first two pillars of governmental precarization (instruments of governing and economic conditions) and to describe the specific conditions in the local IPA field during the “expansion period”, we introduce the concept of *material cultural policies*. To some extent this resembles Jeremy Ahearne’s concept of *implicit cultural policies*,²⁷ but it focuses more clearly on policies in areas such as the labour market, housing, education, and childcare that also fundamentally affect conditions in the cultural sector. In order to underline that everyone is dependent on social relations and infrastructures in order to coexist, we connect *material cultural policies* to Judith Butler’s elaborations on *interdependency*.²⁸ Similarly to power

15 Couldry 2000, 4.

16 Foucault 1997, 292.

17 Foucault 1982, 790.

18 Foucault 1980, 39.

19 McRobbie 2016, 10-12.

20 Jackson & Mazzei 2012, 59.

21 Cf. *ibid.*, 57.

22 Bourdieu 1993, 37.

23 *op. cit.* 114.

24 McRobbie 2016, 70.

25 Lorey 2015, 13.

26 McRobbie 2016, 14.

27 Ahearne 2009.

28 Butler 2015, 20.

relations, Butler describes interdependency as changeable and impossible to overcome, and the goal is to create conditions under which people can live in a mutual and equal dependency.²⁹

Methods and Material

There are several benefits of using multiple data in research on IPA groups; in our case, ethnographic interviews and fieldnotes, funding applications, and local newspaper articles.³⁰ Mixing the materials and implicitly comparing the past and present voices of the artists allows us to observe the way the stories are told and re-told,³¹ to detect the norms in the field, and to recognize that the artists' subjectivities are open to multiple and competing discourses.³² Analysing different types of material together also reveals the complex connections between various actors involved in the public funding system. We chose to use thematic analysis in order to identify, analyse, and interpret the patterns of shared meaning within the collected data.³³

Our main material consists of in-depth interviews (and appurtenant fieldnotes) conducted by Liliana Farcas in the spring of 2020 with individuals who were well-known artists in the performing arts field in Gothenburg in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s. In line with the historiographic nature of the "Expansion and Diversity" project, the artists have not been anonymized.³⁴ The "snowball" method of recruitment was used, beginning with Fia Adler Sandblad and the other artists who attended the meeting at Konstpedemin. The final selection of participants included nine IPA artists who had been members of a number of groups in different genres:³⁵ Fia Adler Sandblad (ADAS musikaliska teater), Åsa Eek Engquist (Teater UNO), Robert Jakobsson (Eldteatern, Teater Albatross), Wiveka Warenfalk (Götateatern, Teaterkompaniet), Pita Skogsén (Eldteatern), Gun Lund (Rubicon, E=mc2 Danskonst), Ulf Wideström (Teaterkompaniet), Rolf Sossna (Bizzarr-teatret, En Annan Teater/Masthuggsteatern), and Nasrin Barati (Teater Sesam).³⁶

As a complement to the interviews, we used two types of archival material. Firstly, we retrieved hundreds of applications for municipal funds during 1980–1993 from the archive of the Cultural Support Committee (Kulturstödsnämnden) at the Regional Archive (Regionarkivet) in Gothenburg. This material included self-presentations from the groups, descriptions of their productions, motivations for applying, brochures, and so on. We considered the official responses to also form part of the material. Documents from the archives of other municipal bodies, such as the Cultural Policy Delegation (Kulturpolitiska delegationen) and the Social Services Department (Göteborgs socialförvaltning), were also consulted. Secondly, we went through reviews, advertisements, reports, and other relevant items published in local and national newspapers that had been digitized and made available as part of the "Expansion and Diversity" project.

NEGOTIATIONS OVER FREEDOM AND DEPENDENCY

Interdependency in an Unequal Relation

Since IPA groups are initiated by their members, they are often told: "You have yourself to

29 Butler 2015, 20.

30 This article is a shortened and further developed version of Liliana Farcas' master's thesis, "Precarization in the name of freedom – An ethnographic study of the working and living conditions of early non-institutional performing arts groups in Gothenburg" (2021), supervised by Helena Holgersson and written as part of the research project "Expansion and Diversity". It is available online at <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/69828>

31 Jackson & Mazzei 2012, 3.

32 Richardson & Adams St. Pierre 2018.

33 Braun & Clarke 2019, 593.

34 We sent the full article to all participants and gave them the opportunity to communicate their comments and questions to us. Some of them did, and we have incorporated their responses into the text to the best of our ability in a continued dialogue.

35 In this list, the groups in parentheses are the ones that were mentioned most often by the interviewees.

36 For more information on the artists and groups, see the "Expansion and Diversity" research platform at <https://expansion.dh.gu.se/>

blame if you don't have more money, no one asked you to exist," as Åsa Eek Engquist told us in her interview. The vulnerability of the IPA groups was clear in the archived funding applications that we viewed, and it was often saddening to see the rejections of extensive applications in which groups humbly asked for support and described their situation in terms of a struggle for survival. In an application from 1984, Eldteatern wrote: "We believe that we are needed here in Gothenburg. This is where we want to work and try to create a thriving alternative theatre life."³⁷ Feelings of being disposable were commonly expressed, and the groups seemed to be involved in a constant fight to "matter."³⁸ Gun Lund spoke about how they had to continuously tell the state: "We are important for these cultural political goals. We can fulfil some of the goals." Nevertheless, we argue that the relation between IPA groups and the authorities needs to be understood in terms of interdependency. In an article published in 1988, Mats Sylwan, head of the unit for theatre, dance, and music at the Swedish Arts Council, described how 55% of all children's theatre and 30% of all performances in the country were being produced by IPA groups. However, since the budget for culture grants was fixed, he argued that it was problematic that "theatre politics and its statistical and cultural policy aims have made themselves dependent on the free groups."³⁹



Svarta blommor, Teater Albatross, 1985, photo by Nadia Scapoli
Robert Jakobsson's personal archive

37 Application to the Cultural Support Committee, 25 January 1984.

38 Cf. Butler 2015, 25.

39 Sylwan 1988, 36.

As illustrated above, the artists that we interviewed brought to light an unequal power relation between their groups and the public funding bodies. Against this backdrop, it is interesting that our initial questions on the potential tension between artistic freedom and dependence on public funds triggered only positive memories for most of the artists. Robert Jakobsson said: "I'm 71 years old, and I've actually always done the art and theatre I wanted to, and in some weird way it's always worked out financially." However, as the interviews continued, many respondents recalled how they had needed to adapt, to some extent. A relevant example of this is how Wiveka Warenfalk first emphasized her independence: "There was nothing that ever stopped me. Money never did," but then, when reflecting on the ending of Teaterkompaniet, stressed the decisive role of reliable funding: "It couldn't carry on like that, because it's not possible to live like a poor student your whole life. It's not possible."

We interpret the participants' tendency to spontaneously remember their group as "free" as being connected to the romanticism that Bourdieu recalls in the cultural field.⁴⁰ The emergence of "free groups" coincided with the 1968 movement, which explains why the participants in the meeting at Konstpedemin agreed that they had been part of "something special". "All I can say is that there's less freedom today for the kind of theatre that I find interesting, not because of the funding system, but because of the social climate," Ulf Wideström told us. Many early IPA groups started as touring groups when their members were quite young. They made a living by performing at kindergartens, schools, and associations, by staying in run-down flats, and by taking other jobs on the side. However, over time this setup proved tiring; and as they established themselves in the field, many strived for more predictable funding, which entailed a never-ending process of writing applications. For Nasrin Barati, accepting her dependence on public funds also boiled down to being able to realize her artistic ambitions: "Without [yearly grants] we wouldn't be able to manage the finances and put on theatre at the level I do, with the employees and all the artists who work here."

One aspect of being needed by the authorities in order to fulfil cultural goals was that the groups might feel pressured to address certain issues in their artistic work: "And at the (...) Arts Council, they have opinions about what's important. Like they knew! You have to trust the artists!" Robert Jakobsson said. There were, however, ways to negotiate one's artistic freedom. Fia Adler Sandblad's strategy to increase her degree of self-sufficiency was to start creating small scale productions which were easier to tour with. This was a response to the 1996/97 government bill on cultural policy that, among other things, prioritized productions for young audiences.⁴¹ This incentive disadvantaged ADAs musikaliska teater, that often approached issues such as prostitution and orphanage from a feminist perspective. The decision to focus on smaller productions was, Adler Sandblad stated, "an artistic slash economic choice, because we might not have done it if we'd had more money."

One interesting aspect of the IPA field is that the artists, unlike the employees in performing arts institutions, are not just creators, but also promoters. "I take care of it myself: all the applications, all the accounts, right from the beginning, I've handled all the finances myself, on my own," Gun Lund told us. Thus, the conflict that Bourdieu describes as being characteristic of the relation between artists and their managers becomes an interiorized one.⁴² Some of our interviewees suggested that this sometimes resulted in self-censorship. Rolf Sossna saw this as "a great danger" since "you start doing things because you think someone else wants it to be in a particular way." Nasrin Barati described it as a necessary evil: "Here, no one censors you, not explicitly, but you as an artist do it so you can sell." McRobbie considers the combining of artistic work and promotion to be a "process of creative compromise" in which the balance changes from a "social milieu of innovation" to a "world of projects".⁴³

The Effects of Political Governance

As we went through the funding applications in the archive of the Cultural Support Committee,

40 Bourdieu 1993; McRobbie 2016.

41 Prop 1996/97:3.

42 Bourdieu 1993, 114.

43 McRobbie 2016, 28.

we noticed that if an IPA group was granted money at all, the sum that the municipality distributed was often significantly lower than the amount applied for. Moreover, the applications also suggested that the groups often asked for less money than they actually needed. For instance, in an application to the Cultural Policy Delegation (the funding body that preceded the Cultural Support Committee), Extrateatern asked “only for the very, very necessary” and wrote that “We know that you are also having a hard time financially, and therefore we are not asking for the amount that we really need.”⁴⁴ What we want to focus on here is how the production conditions for IPA groups were shaped not only by cultural policy aims, but by practices such as not granting the sum applied for. The government bill on cultural policies from 1996/1997 includes, in a section on the IPA dance field, the observation that “This makes it difficult for the groups to carry out the projects as they were originally intended.”⁴⁵

During the interview, Rolf Sossna commented on the underfunding of projects: “Often you got maybe half of what you applied for”, and then asked: “How do you build half a bridge?” Nevertheless, he concluded that the authorities “knew somehow” that the IPA groups would complete their projects despite having insufficient funding. One common reason behind the decision not to cancel underfinanced projects seems to have been the strong ideal that financial aspects should not be the driving force in the creative process.⁴⁶ Unfortunately this seems to have resulted in a spiral mechanism. Once a group had managed with less funds than applied for, their chances of receiving full funding the next time were likely to be limited; moreover, the power relation between the group and the public funding bodies had been sustained and normalized.⁴⁷ Resisting this governmental practice was difficult, as Teater Bhopa saw in 2005. After not receiving the amount requested, they refused to produce the shows described in the application. Their producer, Linda Isaksson, wrote in a debate article: “We cannot compromise on our demand for high artistic quality and good working conditions for our employees.”⁴⁸ Although Teater Bhopa was one of the major IPA groups in Gothenburg at that time, the result of their resistance was that they had to close down. “That was a bit of a sensation,” Rolf Sossna commented in the interview.

As discussed above, the IPA groups were often reminded that they were formed by free choice, and this generated a feeling that there was no one else to blame in the case of financial failure. As McRobbie explains, self-blame “serves” neoliberalism, especially when the social structures are “increasingly illegible or opaque,”⁴⁹ as is the case in the IPA field. Working under these circumstances over a long period of time entails a form of self-exploitation. “*I work 15 hours a day, seven days a week without getting extra money for those hours. Never took (overtime pay) and never will, because we don't have that money,*” said Nasrin Barati, who is still active as an artist. What we want to highlight here is how this reaction carries the risk of reinforcing the spiral mechanism. At the individual level, the self-exploitation is invisible until the norms change.⁵⁰ Our interviews suggest that liveable wages are not the norm in the IPA field. Pita Skogsén described her reaction when receiving a salary, and hence holiday compensation, for working as a drama teacher in 2003: “*For me, it was abnormal that I, as a person doing theatre, would get a salary without working in the summer.*”

The second example of how the material conditions of IPA groups were shaped by funding practices is a measure aimed at improving the situation in the field. In 1988, the Swedish Arts Council decided to grant more money to fewer IPA groups. The result was a separation of the groups into two teams, which Mats Sylwan referred to as an “A-team” consisting of groups in Sweden that received yearly grants from the state (18 groups in 1988/89) and a “B-team” consisting of the groups that received project-based grants from the state (120 groups in 1988/89).⁵¹ This added a new level of competition between the groups, as the importance of

44 Application to the Cultural Policy Delegation, 22 January 1979.

45 Prop. 1996/97:3.

46 Cf. Bourdieu 1993, 39.

47 Cf. Jackson & Mazzei 2012, 57; Foucault 1997, 292.

48 *Svenska Dagbladet*, 14 December 2005.

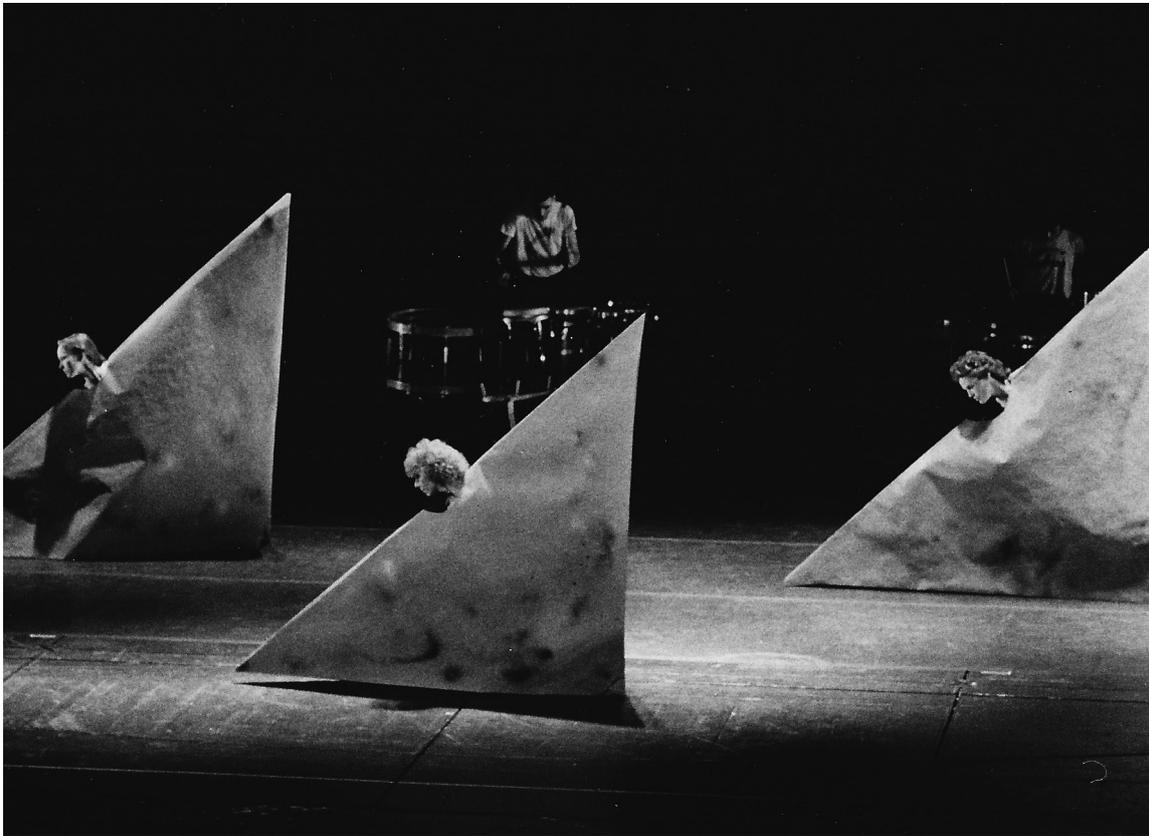
49 McRobbie 2016, 23.

50 Butler 2009, 3.

51 Sondén 1988, *Göteborgs-Posten* 3 October.

the yearly grants increased “both financially and in terms of status,” as Rolf Sossna explained. Fia Adler Sandblad described this as “the locked system.”

Gun Lund strongly emphasized that, in comparison to theatre groups, making it as an independent dance group was a double struggle for Rubicon. While the institutions focused on ballet, Rubicon developed a new form of dance, later labelled as “free dance” (*fridans*),⁵² and put a lot of effort into attracting new audiences. They also had to create performances that the funding bodies would be likely to grant money for; for example, performances for young audiences. In the mid-1980s, “the council suddenly threw out everyone who worked with ethnic dance,” Lund told us. Further pressure came when the Swedish arts council decided to fund only those dance groups with their own stage.⁵³ This coincided with Rubicon starting *Unga Atalante*⁵⁴ in 1987; after ten years of touring, they were exhausted and felt the need for a new artistic direction, and so were able to keep their subsidies.⁵⁵ However, this did not secure their financial situation. Gun Lund explained to us that when working as a touring group, the members of Rubicon had supported themselves via “day jobs,” but maintaining their stage meant they could not spare the time to keep their regular jobs. “At the same moment when we got the stage, we had to go to the employment agency,” Lund recalled, regardless of Rubicon belonging to “the A-team” and receiving both national and municipal yearly grants.



Ark till Ark, Rubicon, 1985, photo by Lena Krantz, Gun Lund's personal archive

52 von Rosen 2018.

53 Cf. Hammergren 2011.

54 *Unga Atalante* was inaugurated in 1987 as a stage for modern dance and opera. Further information is available at <https://expansion.dh.gu.se/organization/743>.

55 von Rosen 2018.

Having a permanent stage was not a guarantee of survival, and in Götateatern's archived applications for municipal financial support we found a relevant example of this. Götateatern described how, in 1979, they opened a permanent stage for children's theatre by converting a textile factory for 250 000 SEK, which they paid with their annual grants. Although advance bookings confirmed that their productions were appreciated, after the completion of the stage they found themselves in a "financial dilemma." The number of seats in the venue was limited, and the profit from tickets did not cover the production costs. Moreover, since for financial reasons they now only had an ensemble of four, they could not produce a supplementary income by touring.⁵⁶ After multiple rejected applications, they were close to bankruptcy despite their efforts: "We have worked under inhumane conditions for over three years to get back on our feet and carried at least double workload per person." To avoid additional debts they eventually had to give up their stage. They sold their equipment and worked on a new production for touring, "completely without pay," until they finally decided to quit. "The killing blow" was, they wrote, when the Swedish arts council let them know that since their lack of a permanent stage meant that they were now considered a new group, they were no longer guaranteed any yearly grants.⁵⁷

By using the concept of *governmental precarization*, we want to stress how both cultural policies and funding practices shaped the conditions in the IPA field. Established groups also found themselves in financial difficulties and had their field of possibilities reduced by the unequal power relation with the funding bodies.⁵⁸ Drawing on Lorey's three pillars helps us describe how the complex interaction between national and local decisions, policies, and measures (instruments of governing), combined with a lack of sufficient financial resources in the cultural field (economic conditions), created clear hierarchies in the IPA field, and impacted the way the artists understood themselves as being torn between artistic freedom and dependency (modes of subjectivation).⁵⁹

Material Conditions and Creative Survival Strategies

The two sections above might seem to suggest that IPA groups had a limited capacity for action, but in this part of our analysis we will discuss how their creative survival strategies enabled their artistic practices. The first survival strategy that we want to discuss is performing for young audiences. The municipal governing initiatives that encouraged IPA groups to do this included funds granted directly to the productions for young audiences, equalization grants (utjämningsbidrag) for every ticket sold, and performances ordered by the municipal Social Services Department (Socialförvaltningen). Our impression is that although many IPA groups wanted to perform for young audiences, for some this choice was at least partly pragmatic. In a newspaper article published in 1989, Wiveka Warenfalk explained that "If we put on theatre for children, there is at least a small possibility that the activity will continue."⁶⁰ Looking back, Rolf Sossna realized how, in the early 1990s at En Annan Teater, "In a way it was the productions for children that were financing the ones for adults."

56 Application to the Cultural Support Committee, 13 October 1982, ref K4:53/82. Also available in the article on Götateatern on the "Expansion and Diversity" research platform.

57 Application to the Cultural Support Committee, 23 May 1984, ref K4:57/84. Also available in the article on Götateatern on the "Expansion and Diversity" research platform.

58 Cf. Foucault 1997.

59 Lorey 2015, 13.

60 Andersson 1989. *Göteborgs-Posten* 11 November.



Gycklarnas återkomst, Bizarr-teatret, 1982, photo by Kari Jantzen, Museum of Gothenburg (Göteborgs stadsmuseum)

Despite all the circumstances that made it favourable for IPA groups to produce performing arts for young audiences, there were difficulties implied in the process regarding artistic freedom. Åsa Eek Engquist told us how their practice of talking to the children after the performance was called into question during one period: *“It was considered wrong to disturb the young people’s artistic experience. But if they wanted to talk about something or process an experience, we always saw that as our responsibility.”* Her example illustrates the tension between the group’s ideas about certain topics, artistic expressions, and way of interacting with the audience and the teachers’ ideas about what is appropriate for children to be exposed to. Nasrin Barati described how the adults involved in children’s education sometimes functioned as a barrier: *“War, death, there are lots of topics that one cannot address, unfortunately.”* Nevertheless, she had found ways to approach these topics.

The conditions in the IPA field were determined not just by the content and implementation of explicit, but also implicit cultural policies.⁶¹ In order to highlight the importance of general social welfare, we conceptualize policies in areas such as housing, labour market, and education as material cultural policies. One policy area that affected the survival strategies of IPA groups was housing. Pita Skogsén told us how her family was able to live in Haga in central Gothenburg for 175 SEK a month in the 1980s: *“We had a large apartment of 80 square metres with both a working fireplace and a gas stove. (...) Now an apartment like that costs maybe between 10 000 and 15 000 crowns.”* In addition to affordable housing, at this time many groups also had access to free or low-cost spaces for both performances and rehearsals; for instance, the culture centre Sprängkullen and Masthuggsteatern, which was part of a youth centre.⁶² Studying and living on student grants was another complementary source of income, especially in the early years of the interviewees’ careers, as Robert Jakobsson and Rolf Sossna mentioned. Organizing and leading study circles on the performing arts was yet another financial alternative for “groups that did not receive many grants from the state and the municipality,” Åsa Eek Engquist recalled.

The second example of a survival strategy that we would like to elaborate on is connected to labour market policies. There was a strong consensus among the respondents that unemployment benefit (a-kassa) was one of the main financial sources for the IPA groups during

61 Ahearne 2009.

62 The “Expansion and Diversity” research platform also includes information on important places in the local field of IPA in Gothenburg.

the 1980s and 1990s. “Unemployment benefit meant you could survive, and it was seen as normal,” Pita Skogsén told us. This was described as a tacit agreement between the public employment service (Arbetsförmedlingen) and the IPA groups. “Actually, you can’t say it in public, but everyone knows it,” Gun Lund said in a news article from 1989.⁶³ Rolf Sossna confirmed this in the interview: “It was like an official secret, you didn’t talk about it, but that’s how it was.” According to Fia Adler Sandblad, the employees at the public employment service agreed to financially support the artists during the summers, knowing that the groups usually resumed their performances in autumn. She recalled that “(I)f you said: ‘Now I have a great project that I can work with!’, then they said ‘Ah, that’s good!’”

Nevertheless, experiences of receiving unemployment benefit while rehearsing seemed to vary. For Wiveka Warenfalk, the pride of “*doing good things*” was the dominant feeling, and so she considered unemployment benefit to be “*a pure survival thing*” and therefore “*nothing shameful at all*.” Rolf Sossna talked about this in terms of “*a kind of punk pride*.” On the other hand, in a debate article published in 1997, Hasse Carlsson, playwright at Teater Bhopa, protested against receiving less grants than they had applied for, saying that “*all artists need self-confidence to be able to develop*,” and “*to pretend that what one does, does not exist, is soul-killing*.”⁶⁴ A diminishing self-confidence will gradually lead to self-blame, and this might, we argue, be part of the reason why artists in the IPA field tend to see themselves as being fully responsible for their financial situation. From a theoretical perspective, the practice of working to make new productions while receiving unemployment benefit, when this is sanctioned by the authorities, can be understood as yet another form of *governmental precarization*. It obscures the shrinking protection of the welfare state.⁶⁵

Concluding Discussion

“We were part of something special!” Fia Adler Sandblad reminds her colleagues after explaining why she invited them to Konstspidemin to talk about the early years of physical theatre in Gothenburg. Rolf Sossna concurs with this when sharing his thoughts about the groups he had been part of, concluding that “We were actually pioneers!” Those who have pursued a pedagogical career, including Pita Skogsén and Svante Grogarn (Teater Albatross), express their concern about the well-being of their current students. Tinna Ingelstam (Teater Kolibri) mentions that in the 1980s, unlike nowadays, they were able to live on very little money while creating their performances. When it is Robert Jakobsson’s turn to speak, he starts walking around the room while gesticulating and talking loudly. Everyone starts applauding; it seems that some recognize his way of expressing himself, while others, like us, appreciate his engagement. The next person, Michele Collins, a groundbreaking performing artist, starts doing step dance moves as a reply to Robert’s speech. Everyone applauds again.

One important ambition of the research project “Expansion & Diversity” has been to produce an inclusive historiography of local IPA groups. This article contributes to that aim by focusing on two under-researched areas: the municipal distribution of cultural grants, and the material conditions in the IPA field. In this concluding discussion we would like to elaborate further on some of our findings. Firstly, we want to highlight how the IPA groups’ intention to avoid financial aspects becoming the driving force in the creative process, in combination with the design of the public funding system and local funding practices, created a *spiral mechanism*. The most common strategy of resistance that the IPA groups used against insufficient funding was to downplay the economic aspects and instead focus on their artistic practice and independence. During the interviews with the artists, we noticed that their financial situation was not a topic that they were used to talking about. From a *power relation* perspective,⁶⁶ what the IPA groups accomplished by this self-exploitation was to sustain their position in the cultural field.⁶⁷ However, by carrying out underfinanced projects, they increased the risk of being granted lower sums

63 *Göteborgs-Posten*, 11 November 1989.

64 Carlsson 1997. *Göteborg Tidning*, 22 October.

65 Cf. McRobbie 2016, 45.

66 Foucault 1982; 1997.

67 Bourdieu 1993.

than applied for in future applications, and hence the risk of having to rely on unemployment benefit. We have argued that this process ought to be understood as an example of what Lorey conceptualizes as *governmental precarization*,⁶⁸ which is especially interesting considering that decent working conditions in the cultural sector have been a pronounced cultural policy objective in Sweden since the 1970s.⁶⁹

Secondly, in Sweden, cultural policies have been treated as an integrated part of the welfare project, which means that values beyond artistic freedom and quality have been emphasized.⁷⁰ Our study suggests that this was particularly pronounced at the municipal level. The working conditions in the field of IPA in Sweden in 1970s–1990 were also affected by the levels of general social welfare, and consequently we have introduced the concept of *material cultural policies*. The survival strategies of the IPA groups during the “expansion period” were dependent on the accessibility of unemployment benefit, affordable housing, and rehearsal studios, generous student loans, and funding for study circles. Since some of our respondents are still active in the IPA field – Fia Adler Sandblad, Robert Jakobsson, Nasrin Barati, and Gun Lund in IPA groups and Pita Skogsén as a drama teacher – we also gained some insight into the current situation. In the past two decades, cultural policies have gone through a market-oriented transformation.⁷¹ Unlike in 1972, when the official report from the Swedish government on cultural policies underlined the need for permanent employment opportunities in the sector, the corresponding report from 2009 identifies the need to increase business and entrepreneurship in artistic activity.⁷² However, the precarious working conditions in the IPA field today are as much a result of the dismantling of the welfare state that has occurred in recent decades.⁷³ Many of the survival strategies that our interviewees described in the interviews are impossible today.

Thirdly, we would like to conclude by addressing the *romanticized* view of artistic work in the IPA field that we identified in the interviewees’ accounts.⁷⁴ On the one hand, striving for the romantic ideal of a “typical artist” might, as we have shown, result in self-exploitation and obstruct the prospects of increased financial compensation.⁷⁵ Recent labour market research also shows that the artist’s flexible and independent way of working has now come to constitute a “prototype” for other sectors.⁷⁶ On the other hand, as is so clearly shown in our interviews, the same ideal also serves to empower cultural practitioners. This still seems to be the case,⁷⁷ but we suggest that this was particularly apparent during the expansion period. The choice to form an IPA group was the members’ own, and this resulted in a weak negotiating position in relation to the public funding bodies. Nevertheless, with their innovative artistic practices, and as a part of the 1968 movement, they destabilized the position of the institutional performing arts in the cultural field.⁷⁸ It is against this backdrop that we understand the pride of having been part of “something special” expressed by the participants in the public meeting that we attended at Konstpedemin.

68 Lorey 2015.

69 Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy and Analysis 2022.

70 op. cit. 70.

71 Friberg 2014.

72 SOU 2009:16.

73 Cf. McRobbie 2016, 45.

74 The participants did not use the word “romantic” to describe their view of their life and work in the IPA field. We use it as a theoretical concept in order to underline how independent artists have become role models in the neoliberalization of the labour market; see for example McRobbie 2016.

75 *ibid.*, 70.

76 Cf. Flisbäck 2017, 515.

77 Cf. Miscevic 2014, 198.

78 Cf. Foucault 1997, 292.

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