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artikel

# Socially Sustainable Work Processes in Danish Fringe Theatre

## *A Case Study of KULD*

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### *Abstract*

*Denne artikel undersøger det danske vækstlagsteater og dets position mellem amatør- og professionel scene. I artiklen fokuseres på ubetalt arbejde, kunstnerisk integritet og sociale bæredygtige praksisser. Artiklen identificerer alternative modeller for arbejdsprocesser og trivsel.*

*This article explores Danish fringe theatre and its position between amateur and professional stages. It focuses on unpaid labour, artistic integrity, and socially sustainable practices. The study identifies alternative models for work processes and well-being.*

### *keywords*

*social sustainability, unpaid artistic labour, alternative work models, well-being in theatre*

## **Introduction**

In contemporary cultural economies, freelancing has become the norm rather than the exception. This particularly takes place in the arts, where precarious working conditions are often disguised as opportunities for passion-driven work. It is well known that working within the arts is rarely lucrative, and perhaps equally well understood that the sector is infamous for fostering exploitative or unsupportive work environments, one example being Marina Abramovic's performance at a donor gala at LA Museum of Contemporary Art in 2011, where performers were paid a small fee to perform nude for hours with their heads stuck through a dining table, slowly spinning around; this performance echoing the ethical disruptions of Santiago Sierra's performances in the 1990s and 2000s, paying participants minimal amounts for actions such as getting a tattoo, spending 15 days behind a brick wall in solitude or sit inside cardboard boxes for extended periods of time (Novati 2019, 224-225). Against this backdrop, it is worth asking: what does it mean to work for free in a field already marked by structural precarity? And how do we foster socially sustainable work cultures within groups working for free?

This article takes its point of departure in Danish fringe theatre (*vækstlaget* in Danish), a term used to describe the liminal space between amateur and professional theatre. To understand *vækstlaget*'s position, we might imagine the Danish theatre world as a house. In the basement, amateur theatre thrives on community, joy, and unpolished energy with a focus on the social aspects rather than a polished product. On the top floor, institutional theatres enjoy prestige and funding, largely inaccessible to outsiders. And on the ground floor we find *vækstlaget*, where ambitious, unpaid creatives operate, hustling between artistic integrity, economic survival, and personal well-being. Within this sector, unpaid artistic labour is common, however, it is here at the 'lower' and more dicey levels of the theatre industry that we might also find models of different, more socially sustainable work practices.

However, this spatial metaphor should not imply a strict hierarchical division, nor suggest that innovative or care-centred work practices are only to be found on the 'lower' levels of the theatre system. While *vækstlaget* most certainly is a fruitful starting place for alternative models of collaboration and labour organisation, it is important to recognise that similar shifts are taking place within certain established institutions. For example, Nørrebro Teater has implemented a four-day workweek and a comprehensive set of wellbeing policies aimed at reducing mental strain and rethinking long-standing norms in the theatre field; norms historically rooted in long hours, hierarchical production structures, and creative "suffering". Likewise, Betty Nansen Teatret has developed a detailed *procesdesign* model that supports co-creative authorship, collective decision-making, and reflexive evaluation across the production timeline. Similarly, Ireland's *Basic Income for the Arts* (BIA) pilot scheme is a state-level initiative to revalue artistic labour, offering artists and creative workers a weekly payment of 325 EUR to support ongoing practice outside of project-based or productivity-driven funding models (Teppo 2025, 2). These examples indicate that the desire for more balanced and human-centred work structures is not exclusive to fringe theatre, but part of a broader cultural shift within the sector of performing arts in Denmark and abroad.

In this context, fringe theatre groups such as the Aarhus-based group KULD<sup>1</sup>, of which the author of this article, Amalie Bjarnø Rasmussen, is a member, are not on the edges, but rather entangled in a wider system that increasingly questions traditional notions of artistic labour. While KULD works without institutional resources, their work resonates with broader debates around well-being, value, and care in the arts. To understand the implications of their practice, this article draws on theories of value (Bourdieu, 2002; Holten, 2024), artistic labour (Kunst, 2015), and systems theory (Valentinov 2014) to reflect on how KULD's unique but simultaneously non-exceptional position can shed light on wider structures. Through the case study of KULD this article explores how unpaid cultural labour can function as a site of resistance, experimentation, and reimagining. Rather than dismissing volunteer-based artistic work as inherently exploitative, I argue that it can offer crucial insights into how the cultural field might begin to shift its understanding of value, time, and social sustainability.

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1) KULD consists of eight women in their mid-twenties, who share the interest in exploring relationships and dynamics between people, and we always start by looking at ourselves.



## Care and value as concepts

The concepts of value, care, and social sustainability are closely linked and central to understanding artistic work in fringe theatre. Value is explored in both human terms and economic ones. Holten and Kunst highlight how many essential aspects of artistic labour such as collaboration, emotional investment, and care, are often invisible in traditional market systems that only recognise things with a price tag (Holten 2024, 15, 122-124; Kunst 2015, 143-144). Their critique encourages us to think of value as including social and affective contributions. Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital supports this, showing how artistic practices build symbolic value, even if they do not translate directly into money (Bourdieu 2002, 281).

Care is seen not just as a private act, but as a political and collective practice. Kunst argues that care is deeply embedded in how artists work, and she critiques how emotional labour can be exploited under the pressure to stay productive and available (Kunst 2021, 6-8). Rather than being treated as a soft or secondary issue, care should be seen as a structural and shared responsibility.

From this, the idea of social sustainability emerges. In this article, it refers to fair, long-term working conditions that support both the group and the individual. Inspired by Haraway, this idea sees sustainability as something relational and context-specific, unique to where and how people are working (Haraway 1988, 589). It also ties in with the idea that innovation and community engagement have value and should count for more than just profit (Bourdieu 2002, 281). Importantly, social sustainability also means recognising that people face different challenges depending on gender, class, race, and geography (Kunst 2021, 27-29), and that care and value must be built with these differences in mind.

## Who is KULD?

KULD is an Aarhus-based theatre collective formed by university students of dramaturgy. The group emerged from different university projects that evolved into a long-term collaboration. They have produced two key works: *Twilight Blues* (2022), a fast-tracked production completed in under three months, and *F for Elsk* (2025), a longer production completed in 2 years. These projects form the empirical basis of this article. *Twilight Blues* (2022) was produced under tight deadlines and a clear distribution of roles; the production revealed the dangers of mimicking institutional models within volunteer-led groups. By contrast, for most of its production time, *F for Elsk* (2025), exemplified a work culture that was flexible, care-based and grounded in social sustainability, albeit in ways that made it more difficult to fund and finalise. Together, the two productions offer contrasting models for understanding the relationship between time, value, and well-being in fringe theatre.

## Ethics

As a researcher embedded in KULD, I occupy a dual role as both participant and observer. This position provides intimate access to the group's work processes and values as well as enables deeper

trust (Brinkmann and Tanggaard 2015, 208) but also requires a high degree of reflexivity to avoid over-identification. My presence inevitably influences the data, and my interpretations are shaped by the social and creative dynamics I am part of (Brinkmann and Tanggaard 2015, 463). Following Haraway's concept of situated knowledge, I recognise my perspective as partial and embodied instead of neutral or detached (Haraway 1988, 583). This reflexive stance is not a weakness but a methodological asset, by anchoring the research in lived, context-sensitive understanding.

To maintain reflexivity, principles such as transparency, consent, and care has guided my methodological approach. All participants were fully informed of both the study and this article's purpose and scope. While formal consent was given via a GDPR-compliant form for the study, participants also gave explicit written consent for their contributions to be included in this article. Anonymity was offered and maintained using pseudonyms. Inspired by feminist ethics, I have prioritised relational responsibility and co-authorship in the production of knowledge by giving KULD access to all data produced during the study (Haraway 1988, 588).

## Methodology

Data for this study was collected through a triangulated qualitative approach spanning from 2022 to 2025. This included long-term participant observation, document analysis, and a semi-structured group interview. As a member of KULD, I engaged in continuous observation of rehearsals, meetings, and retreats, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the group's evolving work practices within their own natural settings (Brinkmann and Tanggaard 2015, 222).

To supplement this, I analysed a range of internal documents such as production plans, evaluations, and meeting summaries. These materials offered insight into the group's intentions, reflections, and structures over time, supporting a longitudinal understanding of their values and working culture (Brinkmann and Tanggaard, 2015, 500).

Finally, a group interview was conducted on October 4th, 2024, centred on KULD's recent productions *Twilight Blues* (2022) and *F for Elsk* (2025). Taken together, these methods allowed for an empirically grounded, context-sensitive exploration of socially sustainable work processes within Danish fringe theatre.

## Theoretical Framework

The study follows a theory-driven approach, where both data collection and analysis are guided by ideas from phenomenology, social sustainability, systems theory, and feminist economics. To make sense of the complex conditions of unpaid artistic work, we can base this study on a metaphor: a table on the ground floor of the imagined Danish theatre house. Around this table we have key thinkers whose theories help us understand the social, economic, and identity-based dynamics shaping labour in *vækstlaget*.

Bojana Kunst initiates the dialogue with a critique of the contradictory positioning of the artist in late capitalist society. She highlights how artistic labour is simultaneously celebrated for its

creativity and heavily exploited, often subsumed under what she coins “pseudo-activity” which are activities that appear to be resisting or challenging capitalist logics but ultimately reinforce them (Kunst 2015, 10-11, 178). Her concept of “heteronomous autonomy” explains the tension artists face in negotiating external demands such as funding structures and institutional expectations, while attempting to maintain artistic independence (Kunst 2015, 10). Kunst criticises the romantic notion of pure autonomy and instead, she sees artistic freedom as the ability to actively reflect on and influence the systems and conditions that govern how artistic work is carried out. (Kunst 2015, 152-153). Importantly, she foregrounds slowness and refusal as acts of resistance against productivity-driven models of value (Kunst 2015, 175).

Seated beside Kunst, Niklas Luhmann brings in a systems-theoretical perspective. For Luhmann, the theatre field (like any social subsystem) is operationally closed, functioning according to its own internal codes and logics. However, it maintains structural couplings with other systems such as funding bodies, audiences, and educational institutions, which are necessary for its reproduction but also sites of friction (Valentinov 2014, 15-17). In the context of *vækstlaget*, these couplings are evident in the negotiation between internal artistic priorities and external evaluative criteria. While Luhmann acknowledges that a complete alignment across systems is improbable (his so-called “governance pessimism”), he also allows for negotiated adaptation and dialogue as mechanisms for navigating these tensions (Valentinov 2014, 17).

Across the table, Pierre Bourdieu offers a more embodied account of structural conditions. His conceptual triad of habitus, field, and capital explain how artists in *vækstlaget* internalise and enact their position within the cultural hierarchy. Bourdieu identifies three forms of cultural capital: embodied (competence and skill), objectified (physical artefacts and tools), and institutionalised (formal recognition through degrees, awards, etc.) (Bourdieu 2002, 282-286). These capitals, while significant within artistic fields, often fail to translate into economic capital in the broader neoliberal context. Therefore, artists may accumulate substantial symbolic value without the corresponding material return, which reveals how capitalist systems systematically devalue non-monetised forms of labour (Bourdieu 2002, 281).

Here, Emma Holten interjects with a feminist economic critique, which lends itself to the conversation more as an element of debate rather than theory. Her critique, however, aligns with Bourdieu and steers the conversation into the domain of care and reproductive labour. Holten problematises traditional economic frameworks that systematically marginalise emotional, relational, and maintenance-oriented forms of work, when they are unpaid or underpaid (Holten 2024, 20, 97, 129). Her work sheds light on the invisibility of care and reproductive labour within dominant criteria of value, arguing for a broader, more inclusive redefinition of what constitutes valuable contribution within the arts. In this light, socially sustainable work practices are not merely logistical or organisational interventions, but political acts of recognition and redistribution.

At this moment, Kwame Anthony Appiah brings a critical lens to the identity politics entangled with artistic labour. Appiah argues that identities are neither fixed nor purely self-determined but are co-constructed through the interplay of internal self-understanding and external ascription (Appiah 2018, 9). When it comes to KULD and other groups within *vækstlaget*, labels

such as “emerging artist” function ambivalently. On one hand, they confer visibility and legitimacy; on the other, they risk reinforcing institutionalised hierarchies and limiting artistic autonomy. As articulated in the KULD group, one member said: “I see it as a strength being part of *vækstlaget*. I would get a tummy ache if we started calling ourselves professionals” (Group interview oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 2024). This ambivalence reflects Appiah’s observation that identity categories, while sometimes strategically useful, can also operate as constraints.

Appiah’s incorporation of habitus (understood as the deep-seated, socially acquired dispositions through which we interpret the world) further illuminates how artists navigate these identity positions (Appiah 2018, 21-22). Members of KULD must continually negotiate not only institutional expectations but also their own affective relationship to artistic labour and community. KULD’s work form in *F for Elsk* (2025) based on resistance to fixed roles, commitment to collective and evolving identity formations resonate with Appiah’s call for a non-essentialist, relational understanding of identity. Through this lens, *vækstlaget* is not merely a career phase or structural position, but a fluid and contested site of belonging.

## Rethinking Resistance - Theory in Practice

While Kunst’s theories in her work *Artist at Work* (2015) offer us a critique of how artistic labour is entangled with late-capitalist demands for productivity, Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt (2017) highlights several limitations that are important to look at when applying Kunst’s ideas to theatre in practice or concrete cases such as KULD. Schmidt argues that Kunst’s proposal of slowness and refusal, “non-work” and “laziness”, as acts of resistance, risk becoming too distant from reality. Schmidt argues that Kunst’s solutions may appear as privileged solutions that do not consider factors such as uneven distribution and gendered condition within the arts (Schmidt 2017, 140, 143). Schmidt’s critique points to a broader issue at hand: the need to situate theory not only in relation to cultural systems, but also the lived complexity of artistic work, including the invisible and reproductive labour feminist theorist Silvia Federici argues is central to any production of value (Schmidt 2017, 143). These reflections can provide us with a more cautious use of implementing refusal-strategies when analysing artistic sustainability.

Taking departure in Luhmann’s system theory, the limitations of Kunst’s resistance strategies become clearer. A collective such as KULD cannot fully commit to non-work or laziness without putting their ability to interact with external systems such as funding bodies, venues and festivals at risk, because they depend on it. In alignment with Luhmann’s theory, a system that refuses to maintain structural couplings risks being excluded rather than transformed. Because of this, this article approaches Kunst’s concepts as critical provocations that highlight the pressure found within artistic labour, rather than as prescriptive models. Schmidt’s critique, combined with Federici’s emphasis on reproductive labour and Luhmann’s systemic limitations, positions this article’s analysis: examining how KULD negotiates care, structure, hierarchy and sustainability not through strategies of refusal, but through adaptive, situated practices within the lived realities of *vækstlaget*.

## Historical and socioeconomic context of KULD in *vækstlaget*

The theorists helped us shed light on the cultural, systemic, and value-based dynamics KULD must navigate, but to fully understand their position, we also must situate *vækstlaget* and KULD within their broader socioeconomic and historical contexts.

Back at the table, Luhmann gestures toward the walls of the room, where KULD has now joined them. He points out how the structure KULD works within is not just a neutral container. Rather, it is shaped by history, policy, and systemic design. So let us take a step back and look at how the ground floor of Danish theatre, *vækstlaget*, was built, and who decorated it with its current socioeconomic logic.

KULD's work is deeply embedded in historical structures of gendered and unpaid labour. As Silvia Federici argues, capitalism has long relied on invisible, unpaid work (especially reproductive and creative labour) to sustain itself (Federici 2014, 13, 19). KULD's unpaid work echoes this dynamic: although they operate within Denmark's publicly funded arts system and are supported in part by the welfare state, their creative contributions remain largely unremunerated and undervalued.

KULD's members, mostly highly educated, middle-class women, reflect what Bojana Kunst calls the "flexible artist" who is praised for her freedom, but caught in a cycle of overwork, unpaid labour, and burnout (Kunst 2015, 152, 186-187). Kunst points out that flexibility in the arts is often less about autonomy and more about adaptation to unstable conditions. In the production of *F for Elsk* (2025), KULD responded to this by trying to structure their work in ways that promote care, equity, and collective well-being. Roles were distributed according to interest and capacity, and for much of the production time the group prioritised realistic timelines and shared responsibility – key tenets of what could be called a feminist approach to theatre-making. This approach recalls the spirit of Eksskolen, the 1960s Danish art school that rejected hierarchical teaching in favour of collective authorship and process-based work (Daugaard et al. 2020, 23-24). KULD inherits this legacy by creating space for shared leadership and by resisting the idea that artistic success must be tied to financial return or linear productivity.

Historically, *vækstlaget* was made possible by the 1963 Theatre Act, which decentralised cultural funding and enabled regional, experimental groups to access public resources (Scavenius and Skjoldager-Nielsen 2018, 95-96). Institutions such as Quonga Festival, where KULD presented their debut work, exist because of this policy shift. However, funding structures remain uneven. As lecturer and researcher Louise Ejgod Hansen points out, projects based in Copenhagen tend to receive a greater share of cultural funding, making it harder for Aarhus-based groups like KULD to gain similar access, despite often being more embedded in local communities (Hansen 2015, 78).

In addition, recent critiques from Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt on production aesthetics ("produktionsæstetik") shed light on how creative labour often becomes invisible under the pressure to produce polished, fundable outcomes (Schmidt 2023, 4). KULD's slower, more collaborative methods with *F for Elsk* (2025) challenge this model. Instead of rushing to the next premiere, they treated the process as valuable. Their initial workshop-based development model, where each member contributed with creative material and facilitated workshops for each other at their own pace, free of external deadlines, reflects a commitment to experimentation and mutual learning.



This aligns with Schmidt's call to resist the efficiency-driven mindset often baked into publicly funded arts systems.

Still, even this resistance has limits. As the deadline for *F for Elsk* (2025) approached, KULD encountered friction. The egalitarian structure that had worked so well earlier became harder to maintain when fast decision-making was required. One member noted that they sometimes found themselves "circling back to needing someone to make decisions" (Group interview oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 2024). In this moment, we see what Luhmann would describe as the tension of structural coupling: a closed system (in this case, KULD's internal values) forced to interact with external demands such as funding timelines, venue requirements, and performance dates.

It is important to note that this friction is not a failure, but a reminder that even the most idealistic practices must negotiate with the world around them. As Foucault might say, any attempt to build alternative systems of value still must operate within existing power structures that shape what is seen as legitimate or valuable (McKinlay and Taylor 2014, 2, 4, 12, 24). And as Bourdieu might argue, even within fringe theatre, cultural capital such as festival appearances, credibility or network access must often be traded for recognition, if not always for money (Bourdieu 2002, 281).

KULD's process demonstrates that the ground floor of Danish theatre is not only a place of beginnings, but also of negotiation. It is where artists like them try to reimagine value, not by rejecting the system entirely, but by pushing back against its terms. In this sense, they are not just working within *vækstlaget* they are actively shaping what it could become.

## Two productions, two processes

Back on the ground floor of Denmark's theatre house, KULD places two contrasting scripts on the table: *Twilight Blues* (2022) and *F for Elsk* (2025). These are not just different plays as we have seen – they are different modes of working.

*Twilight Blues* (2022) was created in about 3 months. The group adopted a quasi-professional organisational structure that emulated institutional hierarchies, characterised by tightly scheduled rehearsals and clearly delineated top-down roles. Responsibilities such as lighting, music, and props were largely compartmentalised and carried out separately from the rehearsal space where the director and dramaturg led the core creative processes. The result was a conventional 30-minute play, told linearly in one domestic space and performed at the Aarhus-based fringe theatre festival Quonga in 2022. The interview showed that while members initially experienced the process as collaborative and having a relatively flat hierarchy, their retrospective reflections, especially when contrasted with later projects, highlight how the compressed three-month timeline contributed to a more hierarchical and compartmentalised working structure than first perceived. This reflection echoes Bojana Kunst's notion of "pseudo-activity", where the urgency of deadlines and the imitation of institutional norms led KULD to reproduce dominant theatre structures, rather than reimagining them, demonstrating how even volunteer-based collectives can be drawn into the rhythms of hyper productivity (Kunst 2015, 42, 115, 124, 150-152, 178).

In contrast, *F for Elsk* (2025) developed over two years with a wish to have a slow, flexible, and collaborative process. Members led thematic workshops, designed around emotional availability and creative curiosity. Everyone contributed dramaturgically and performed equally, resulting in a fragmented, collage-like performance reflecting diverse perspectives on dating. One member described the workshops as “little pieces of research” (Group interview oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 2024), which echoes Cochrane and Trencsényi’s view of the dramaturg as both observer and creator (Trencsényi and Cochrane 2015, 294). The performance played three times at Teater Katapult in 2025. Yet as institutional deadlines approached, tensions began to arise. The flat structure that had supported openness early on began to falter under logistical pressure. One member described the atmosphere as “everyone trying not to step on each other’s toes,” which ultimately led to delays in decision-making and increased emotional strain. These challenges illustrate Luhmann’s notions of structural coupling: the friction that arises when a self-organising, care-driven system is required to interface with rigid external frameworks such as funding cycles and performance schedules (Valentinov 2014, 15-17). The tension that surfaced revealed the limits of resistance, showing that flexibility and slowness require structural support to be sustained under institutional pressure.

However, most of the production of *F for Elsk* (2025) could be described as feminist dramaturgy, which is a practice oriented around sustainability, care, and co-authorship rather than output or prestige. It resonates strongly with Silvia Federici’s notion of communal care as a form of resistance to capitalist individualism (Federici 2014, 41-45). Within KULD, friendship itself functions as infrastructure. Emotional security enables risk-taking. “It doesn’t feel so dangerous when something goes wrong,” one member reflected in the interview. Another added, “Even if everything failed, we’d still be friends. We’d just go grab a beer” (Group interview oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 2024).

This emphasis on care and relationality recalls Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge - a way of knowing that emerges through shared experience, embodied collaboration, and trust (Haraway 1988, 589). Within KULD, such situated knowledge is built not through efficiency, but through dialogue, reflection, and mutual adaptation. However, friendship does not come without its own sets of challenges. “Being friends helps,” one member said, “but it can make it harder to state your opinion when we need to be critical” (Group interview oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 2024). The balance between emotional intimacy and professional accountability requires constant negotiation which is a theme that runs through all of KULDs work as one member notes during the interview: “I had a difficult time [during *Twilight Blues*] figuring out when we were colleagues and when we were friends” (Group interview oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 2024).

## Structure as Support, Not Surveillance

One of the clearest lessons from *Twilight Blues* (2022) was the need for more inclusive creative processes. While the group initially adopted a quasi-professional model with tight deadlines and top-down roles, later reflection revealed that members working with light, sound, and props felt excluded from the core creative space. As one member notes during the interview: “There were these two terms ‘the music girls and the others’ and I just thought that’s not how I want it to be”

(Group interview oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 2024). This led to the group collectively reimagining their working method, opting for a more flexible model of shared leadership based on availability, interest, and skill, by for example having a lead dramaturg and an assistant dramaturg and two directors in the beginning of the process. Interestingly, their approach recalls what Fujimoto observed in Japanese companies that hire based on trainability, where value is put on potential rather than fixed skill (Fujimoto 2017, 23). In a similar way, KULD prioritised curiosity and shared values over rigid expertise, allowing roles to evolve organically.

KULD's shift echoes Bojana Kunst's call for reclaiming time as a space of resistance, where slower, more intentional collaboration allows creativity to flourish (Kunst 2015, 175). Similarly, Haraway (Haraway 1988, 589) argues that accountability must be situated and collective – something KULD actively pursued by flattening hierarchies.

However, their next production, *F for Elsk* (2025), revealed the limits of a fully horizontal approach. Without structural boundaries, the process lacked urgency and decision-making was delayed. The process lost its momentum (a period nicknamed “short death” in the evaluations) resulting in a crisis meeting where the project was reframed and taken up again. As a result, the group recognised that deadlines and timelines are not constraints but scaffolding tools that support rather than restrict creative work as one member noted during the interview: “Now we have a deadline [for *F for Elsk*] and that suits us well at this point” (Group interview oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 2024). Structure, they concluded, should enable, not undermine, collaboration.

## Care as Infrastructure

“We’re not getting paid,” several members said during the interview and because KULD’s work is unpaid, time and energy become precious currencies (Group interview oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 2024). Far from expressing resignation, this statement sets a boundary: their commitment must remain in balance with their personal lives. Such self-awareness reflects what Federici identifies as the ongoing struggle to value reproductive and creative labour that capitalism renders invisible (Federici 2014, 78).

*F for Elsk* (2025) reflected this ethos in practice for most of the production time. Realistic timelines and flexible deadlines allowed space for both rest and experimentation. Physical workshops became the group’s connective tissue. One member created a dance workshop, another created a playwriting workshop, a third a bubble-wrap workshop. One member described these workshops as vital for staying creatively connected: “Everyone had something to contribute, and we all wanted to be in the creative room” (Group interview oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 2024). In this way, each KULD member embodied a dramaturgical function, bridging the conceptual and the practical.

## Precarity, partnership, and professional identity

However, even within this supportive structure of the *F for Elsk* production, precarity remains. As one member admitted, “It was hard to stay motivated when we didn’t know where we were headed” (Group interview oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 2024). The unpaid nature of the work means that fatigue, scheduling

conflicts, and financial strain are constant companions. As mentioned, these experiences resonate with Kunst's (Kunst 2015, 137, 150) critique of the "flexible artist" – a figure central to cultural production but excluded from its systems of recognition and reward.

Still, KULD's engagement with the wider theatre ecosystem provides a sense of legitimacy and growth. Participation in festivals like Quong a offers visibility and cultural capital (Bourdieu 2002, 282-286), even if the material benefits are limited. As one member recalled, established industry professionals were "impressed by their work within *vækstlaget*. This interaction exemplifies the necessary yet uneasy interface between self-contained artistic systems and external institutions (Valentinov 2014, 15-17). The group's collaboration with festivals, funders, and local partners reflects the ongoing negotiation between artistic autonomy and institutional dependency. As highlighted in an internal evaluation, for example, KULD had planned to sell merchandise during a festival but, due to a lack of clear communication, ended up distributing it without compensation. This incident highlights the tensions that emerge when differing value systems intersect, illustrating how structural couplings can generate friction, particularly when external frameworks, such as festival policies, constrain KULD's ability to express and communicate their identity on their own terms.

### An experiment with balance

KULD's development from *Twilight Blues* (2022) to *F for Elsk* (2025) reveals an ongoing negotiation between hierarchy, care, and collectivity. The group initially perceived *Twilight Blues* (2022) as collaborative and horizontally structured, but retrospective reflections revealed a clearer divide – particularly between those involved in the core rehearsals and those working on technical elements. This insight led to a deliberate shift toward a more experimental, flat hierarchy in *F for Elsk* (2025), designed to foster care-based, slower, and more process-oriented collaboration. However, the absence of clear leadership eventually stalled the project, as members hesitated to take charge or make firm decisions. A hierarchy was reintroduced towards the final production phase, not as a return to control, but as a necessary form of structure.

Through this, KULD actively explored the ethics of collaboration, oscillating between traditional and emergent work models – each with their own challenges, especially as members were now geographically dispersed between Aarhus and Copenhagen. Their attempt at care-driven practice echoes what Holten terms a feminist revaluation of labour (Holten 2024, 97, 129). Even without financial capital, KULD's creative and relational investments offer a quiet resistance to dominant theatre logics of speed, visibility, and productivity.

Rather than simply abandoning their care-based model, KULD's experience with *F for Elsk* (2025) prompted a deeper reflection on how structure might serve, not stifle, their values. The group did not reject hierarchy outright but began to understand it as something that can be fluid, responsive, and even supportive when shaped by collective intention rather than imposed authority. This realisation marks a shift from viewing structure as antithetical to care to seeing it as potentially integral to sustaining it under pressure.



Moreover, their navigation of institutional expectations revealed the limits of autonomy within a dependent cultural ecosystem. As KULD moved from internal experimentation to public presentation, the need to articulate timelines, deliverables, and responsibilities became unavoidable. This moment did not undo their collaborative ethos but rather illuminated the ongoing work of adapting ideals to reality which is a balancing act that many fringe theatre collectives must perform. In this sense, KULD's process aligns with Haraway's "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988, 589), acknowledging that working ethically within precarious systems requires not purity, but negotiation. It is precisely within this space of friction that socially sustainable practices begin to take shape – not as perfect models, but as evolving responses to complex conditions.

Rather than negating KULD's achievements, the friction underscores their significance. It makes visible the underlying contradictions between socially sustainable practice and the broader industry structures in which such practices must still operate. In Bourdieu's terms, KULD is rich not in economic capital but in cultural and symbolic capital which is accumulated through collective know-how, artistic experimentation, and a growing presence within alternative theatre circuits (Bourdieu 2002, 281). These forms of capital, though less readily convertible into financial gain, carry weight within the artistic field and offer an important counterpoint to dominant economic valuations.

Emma Holten's feminist economics provides further insight into this dynamic. Her critique of how capitalist systems devalue reproductive and affective labour (Holten 2024, 97, 129) resonates strongly with KULD's emphasis on care, shared responsibilities, and emotional sustainability. Their volunteerism, while structurally precarious, is not devoid of value. Instead, it reaffirms Holten's argument that unpaid labour can be culturally and politically significant when embedded in collective, relational structures.

Similarly, Bojana Kunst's call to resist capitalist acceleration through slowness and collaborative autonomy (Kunst 2015, 175) is echoed in KULD's approach. Their shift away from top-down, pseudo-professional models in *Twilight Blues* (2022) toward a more decentralised, process-oriented structure in *F for Elsk* (2025) reflects an intentional revaluation of time and labour. While this shift did not eliminate challenges (especially at the points of external coupling) it did create space for more reflexive, inclusive, and contextually grounded forms of creation.

Ultimately, this case study points to the need for broader structural shifts. While collectives like KULD can and do develop internal models of sustainability, their long-term viability depends on the flexibility and responsiveness of the systems they interface with. Funding models, institutional timelines, and evaluative frameworks have to evolve to recognise the value of process-based, care-oriented, and collectively governed artistic labour. Without such change, the friction experienced at the boundaries of structural coupling will remain a persistent threat to the sustainability of alternative practices.

In this light, KULD's efforts are not simply creative experiments, but political interventions. They are attempts to reimagine what artistic work can look like and how it can be valued. By holding the ground floor of the Danish theatre house (not only metaphorically but structurally)

they offer a model of resistance and resilience. Their work reminds us that the question is not only what kind of theatre we make, but how and with whom we choose to make it – and at what cost.

## Where to go from here

These findings raise a key question: How might we rethink the conditions under which unpaid cultural labour is carried out? Rather than framing unpaid artistic work solely as a site of exploitation or burnout, this study suggests the importance of cultivating conditions that make such labour more meaningful, sustainable, and even pleasurable.

Drawing on Silvia Federici's feminist critique of reproductive labour, we might understand unpaid artistic collaboration as a form of care work which is essential for cultural continuity yet often devalued within capitalist logics. Reimagining this labour through a lens of collective joy, mutual support, and flexible commitment positions it not as a burden to be endured but as a relational process that can be shaped to fit the lived realities of those participating.

This aligns with Bojana Kunst's call for slower, care-centred modes of production in the arts, where artistic autonomy is grounded in the refusal of accelerated, output-driven timelines. In practice, this means structuring unpaid collaboration around everyone's realistic availability, emotional capacity, and creative potential and thereby moving away from a one-size-fits-all model of participation. As Fujimoto argues in relation to employment practices, recognising potential and adaptability can be more fruitful than narrowly defined roles, especially in contexts marked by precarity.

Adopting such a flexible, person-centred model acknowledges the realities of voluntary work while preserving the transformative potential of artistic collaboration. It also challenges dominant production paradigms by valuing presence, care, and co-creation over productivity alone. Perhaps the most radical act is simply to stay at the table and to keep reimagining the house, not as a hierarchy to ascend, but as a shared home still under construction.

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