



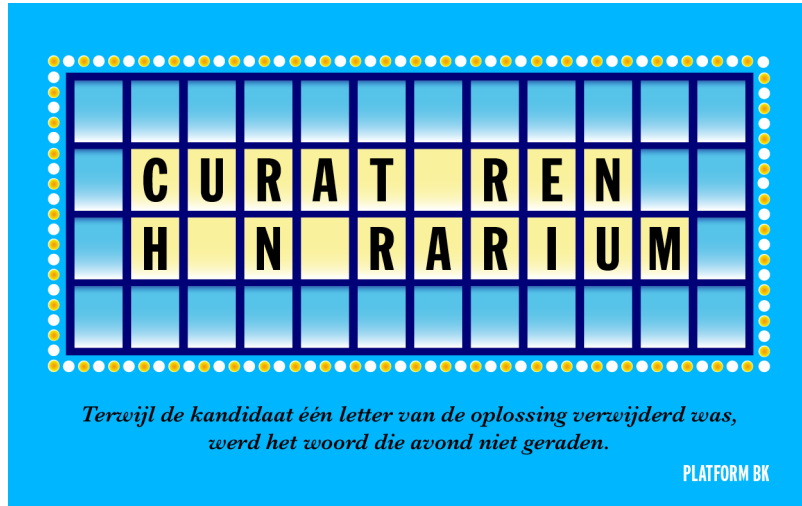
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Preliminary statement on the working conditions and fees of freelance curators in the Netherlands

Posted by Platform BK 01/10/2018

Posted in: Fair Practice, Arbeidsomstandigheden, Curatorenhonorarium, Fair Practice, Inkomenspositie, Zelfstandige curatoren

This post is also available in: Dutch

This document is prepared by the Platform BK Working Group on Curatorial Freelancers, a self-organised collective initiated by and comprised of freelance curators in the Netherlands. It outlines a preliminary statement that maps an agenda for further organising in the interests of fair practice, and commencing with a research project undertaken to verify our claims and to establish concrete steps in addressing the current issues that we outline below.

This statement is undertaken in the light of a rising portion of freelancers (ZZP-ers) within the Dutch national economy in general, and in the arts in particular. For example, the study titled 'Survey of the Labour Market in the Cultural Sector', conducted by the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER) and the Council for Culture,[1] noted that in the 2009–2013 period, the number of freelancers in the cultural sector increased by 20.4%, much more than in the economy as a whole (9.6%).

Finally, the Platform BK Working Group on Curatorial Freelancers acknowledges and salutes the leading work undertaken by artists and associations in the Netherlands, who successfully established an agenda on artist's fees and working conditions at the national level. This work seeks to support and strengthen that achievement through allied organising and solidarity. Further points of reference include the Norwegian Association of Curators' national survey on the working condition of freelance curators, the WAGENCY initiative for artist self-accreditation by Working Artists and the General Economy the United States, as well as the National Association of Visual Arts (Australia) Code of Practice, Chapter 7: Fees and Wages. These examples have been drawn to attention in the Netherlands through Humans of the Institution, a symposium programme organised in Amsterdam in November 2017 by Frontier Imaginaries and the University of Bergen, together with the Veem Theatre.

The statement is divided into three focus areas, each with a statement of current conditions as experienced by members of the Working Group, and with a series of points for research and action.

Focus Area A. Institutional relations and expectations, working conditions and fees

The relation between institutions and curatorial freelancers in the Netherlands is currently marked by the absence of established standards for practice – extending from fees and expected tasks, to the conditions of bargaining and the frequent absence of written agreements

for work. There is a **lack of valorisation and quantification** of the breadth of freelance **curatorial labour**.

Contracts (if any is given) rarely state the details of one's work whereas curatorial work can consist of exhibition production, text writing and editing, PR and communication, graphic design, and registrar roles – and the list goes on. Alongside this, there are no **standard rates for the** aforementioned **variety of tasks**. The convention of **bulk fees** (a fixed figure for an exhibition) do not take into account the numerous and often elastic time-investments of a project and support an expectation that extra time spent always comes with the job. Additionally, bulk fees make no accommodation for the numerous overheads and ongoing costs of freelancing, such as costs of research, the worker's own computer and communications tools, office costs, basic health care, any insurances, or any allowance for the time spent in obtaining work.

These issues are compounded by an **inequality of bargaining power**: a contract takes two to tango, but often it's the freelancer who must abide by deadlines and obligations set by the institution, while the **institution can be much more lax** with regard to needs expressed by the freelancer, or make changes as they go along. This is connected with issue of the difficulty in negotiating **the distribution of resources for a project, where there are often** high fixed PR budgets and expensive opening dinners relative to low fees for both curatorial freelancers and for artists. Often, these high and fixed figures for certain institutional costs do not become apparent until the late phase in a project, creating difficulties and sometimes damaging relationships with artists who are effected by confusion in budgets.

In addition, there is often an expectation from institutions that freelancers can offer **'advice'** and **'consultancy' for free** – for roles such as programme research, jury memberships, moderating and other speaking appearances. This fails to understand that a freelancer's network and expertise is often their only capital.

Finally, there can be a lack of sensitivity in ensuring the **payment of freelancers within a reasonable (max 30 days) period of time**, which places additional burden upon the freelancer in ensuring that a fee has been processed and in handling outstanding bills and expenses in the meantime.

- There is a need for an established standard of itemised invoicing that list the inputs and expenses of freelance curatorial work.
- There is a need for a standardised contract that establishes both the institution and the freelancer's obligations and needs.
- There is a need for a code of fees and rates, commensurate with skill and experience to a fair practice standard, and quantifying costs of overheads as well as travel expenses.
- There is a need to address the health and social costs overheads of the freelancer. A variety of models and their feasibility need to be investigated (for example the model of added percentage to fees on all invoices, as coverage for social security costs).
- There is a need to examine whether the establishment of a code and invoicing structure could help the bargaining power of freelance curators in payment negotiations. Similarly, there's a need to consider a contract structure that could help the bargaining power of freelancers in negotiating the broader terms and working conditions of a project. Could an established body to refer to, such as Platform BK, support the bargaining power by establishing and supporting such codes?
- Finally, if project funding does not come through, curators (and other stakeholders) should be paid for work done to some degree. There is a need for phased project budgeting.

Focus Area B. Cultural ecology, cultural policy, funding, support and opportunities

Relations among actors in the arts is of course influenced by a broader cultural ecology which is marked by an **acceptance of the conditions of austerity in the field**, on all levels. The effects are social as well as financial. They appear in the increased significance of counting visitor numbers as the sole marker of 'impact', to a lack of **solidarity**, not only between freelance curators who agree to work under unsustainable conditions but also amongst other art workers. We acknowledge and seek to work against a climate of secrecy, in which freelancers silently absorb the financial and organisational difficulties emerging from austerity in field, and in which there is silence about the working conditions among arts workers while simultaneously a continuous performance of power and eagerness exists as 'no-one can afford to speak up'.

This effects artists, designers, writers, producers and many of our direct colleagues in the field. Specifically, with regard to curatorial freelancers, we find that cultural support often insufficiently addresses the needs of curatorial projects in terms of funding, residency, exchange and other opportunities. There is an **insufficient appreciation of the creative and intellectual labour** that curatorial work is, and its crucial role in the arts ecology. As a freelance curator it is very easy to 'fall between the cracks' of cultural funding as the 'output' of a curatorial project can be difficult to quantify. As curatorial freelancers, it may be necessary to establish a foundation, in order to have the legal basis to handle larger funds that cover the costs of many artists and workers. However, freelance curators can then find themselves excluded from 'individual' support by the mere fact of the foundation, whether it is active in handling finances or not.