Right here, Right now

Looking from MASSIA towards PAF and beyond

Some gestures for recruitment – historical, comparative, visioning.

This text was presented in December 2023 at PAFs Winter Update Meeting, in order to inform a conversation around the following strands of thought.

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MASSIA opened its doors approximately in 2017. After operating seven years under a similar model like PAF (which started in 2006) there is need for change. This text explores MASSIA's journey in comparison to PAF, and also wants to propose community-building which a) vitalizes the relation between these places and b) transcends both places as isolated unions towards more networked structures.

Given its rich experience of almost 20 years, we want to ask: where was PAF in its first years? What made the experiment 'successful'? What was needed in the beginning to prevent a (structural, financial, social, personal) failure? Were there failures? What did PAF have which MASSIA doesn't have – and vice versa? What can they give towards and what do they need from each other?

Seven years is also long enough to witness the very own way MASSIA has taken. In that sense, both places followed similar ideas and desires, but made something different out of it. Both places can mirror each other in those differences and learn something about themselves. This comes at a time not only when MASSIA needs something, but PAF has probably mobilised as many people as never before to carry the structure of self-organisation, while people being aware of the historical ties between the two places move slowly into the background.

We'd like to say two things before: Many (hi)stories can be told about PAF and MASSIA. With our version, we hope not to be wrong, but we don't insist on being right. Secondly, we had a hard time describing the roles of people being crucial for PAFs development accurately. After all, we refrained from doing it, but still want to give an uncommented, *incomplete* list of those, whose name came up (in reverse alphabetical order): Valentina Desideri, Stephanie Barbier, Perrine Ballieux, Jean-Félix Maraceaux, Eric Remba, Dani Bershan, Dan Lucas, Bojana Cvejic.

Revisiting PAF's history

PAF's beginning was marked by Jan and many others who saw something in the convent in St. Erme, which was yet to come. Structurally, the building needed severe renovations. Legally, a valid form and an agreement with local authorities were needed.

And of course, an undefined group, that is – *people who come and say "we" and make PAF a collaborative project* (Nico Siepen) – had to find themselves. Whilst this would not have been possible without the help of all people coming and contributing, some other factors can be seen as crucial for development in the first years.

This is mainly the presence of Jan Ritsema. Jan brought three very essential things to build PAF: engagement, contacts and money. He stayed in PAF until his death in 2021, being present with decision-making, a lot of work – and again, money. To be invested in the building, equipment and backup in cases of emergencies, which let PAF as a place and community flourish.

The first years of PAF were nevertheless a rough patch. Later on, Jan would often tell that he felt desperate given the enormous amount of work which needed to be done. The lack of visitors made it neither possible to generate income nor to spread out the work to make and sustain PAF. Only a few gave a crucial commitment to keep the structures running. Those also made PAF what it is now, considering its vision and how it's being practised. For different forms of engagements various forms of compensation were to be found, with paying some people in one way or the other. From early on, the economic model of PAF remained shapeshifting.

What was given besides this? First of all, an old, huge and beautiful building, creating space for the spirit of abundance, which was very much part of Jan's vision. But also the geographical situation: Being situated in the countryside, in a small village in rural France. No one would bump into PAF by accident. Both the fast growing and heavily networking community could compensate for the barrier of remoteness. But also – ironically? – globalisation played into the hands of PAF: it could be a *nomadic* space, for more and more people could afford to travel a lot and work remotely. Jan imagined PAF as a place with a 'liquid' topology of objects, space and sociality, and naturally, most people who felt comfortable at PAF already implemented some liquidity in their life.

Jan and many of his conspirators were connected to art institutions, imagining a forum for alternative art education, production and discourse. They brought their students and colleagues along and inspired a community of people to use PAF f.e. with events like Spring Meeting or Summer University, which are still major multiplicators for participants. Those also gave the chance to invite big names in order to gain attention and mark a spot on an international map of cultural production.

Situating ressources

St. Erme is a poor village in one of the poorest regions of France. But then, from the perspective of Massiaru, it is maybe not so poor and not so remote.

The village of St. Erme (about 4000 inhabitants) is small, but has its own train station and a big *intermarché*. It is remote but not so far away from three of the richest cities and cultural capitals of Europe: Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam (where Jan worked for a long time). Each of them has a long (colonial) tradition of supporting their national arts, culture and language, allowing people with certain equipment of class, race, and education to benefit from this system – and making PAF part of its riches.

Massiaru (about 30 inhabitants) is situated 2300 km northeast of St. Erme, close to the Estonian-Latvian border, on the periphery of the European Union. Riga (capital of Latvia) and Tallinn (capital of Estonia) are the closest cities, at about 2 hours driving distance. St. Petersburg is quite as far away as Amsterdam to PAF, the Russian border – the border of the European Union – is 200km away, and since the revival of imperial clashes playing out in Ukraine, "Russia is off the map".

France as well as all its surrounding neighbours belong to the richest EU-countries (led by Germany and France). All Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – rank very low, below the EU average. Even the Picardie, being the poorest region of France, has a slightly higher GDP per inhabitant than the whole of Estonia.

Jan was 61 years old when he bought the convent. He had built a successful career as theatre director and choreographer – with a solid reputation and wide-reaching networks: personal, professional, and institutional. He was a White Dutch man from a real-estate owning middle class family. He was business savvy and had financial funds that enabled the project of PAF to grow to what it was in 2021 (when PAF was 15 years old) and what it is now – with little to no external funding as most cultural organisations depend on. This situation also fertilised the notion of abundance that Jan liked and promoted.

Visiting MASSIA's history

Jan bought the schoolhouse which houses MASSIA when he was 71 years old, shortly after the building in St. Erme had been sold to a collective of 50 shareholders. Jan copied and pasted what PAF had become by that time (with the participation of so many) onto an empty building at the periphery of Europe's mental map – and within the blind spot of most intercontinental mental maps.

When asking Jan why he made the decision to buy the schoolhouse in the Estonian countryside and open MASSIA, his gaze would turn inward: "It's sooo calm here! My

mind can relax." He added that the landscape "and the moss!" reminded him of "how nature looked like" when he was little. Jan was also interested in and connected to Estonia's Performing Arts scene - which, together with PAF's Swedish community, was the people he had in mind would become the next undefined group *who would come and say "we"*, and this time make MASSIA a collaborative project.

This invocation didn't materialise – yet? Even though MASSIA grew from the experience and resources PAF had generated over many years and with many people, it required a lot of groundwork to build its foundation.

The local community *(as in users, not neighbours)* has not adopted MASSIA's offering, and has not yet found its way into that "we" that wants to participate in the collective project. The Baltic Post-Soviet cultural scene is oriented towards "The West" and its cultural capital(s) – a long history of occupation has been preventing its members from doing so. Participation in institutional markets is often essential to artists' economic sustenance. The gestures towards autonomy like those PAF and MASSIA propose don't seem as useful in Estonia and the Baltics; "being apolitical" is common in the region; art and activism are not as close to each other as they are in other places in Europe.

About one year after opening, Jan was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. His health and with it the capacity to travel, as well as the energy he could invest, decreased. In its first years, MASSIA already had to face some major crises: a global pandemic; the imperial war on Ukraine – in a geopolitical sense: a stone's throw away from Estonia; and Jan's death in October 2021.

When Jan died, MASSIA lost its founder and sponsor. Left with only one invested participant to drive the project, and 5000€ in the bank account, heading into Estonia's long winter during Covid year two.

Contrapositions

In 2017, after 9 months of opening, Sepideh moved to MASSIA after having been to PAF once, to join Elsewhere & Otherwise that same year. What Sepideh brought to MASSIA initially, was a curiosity in herbalism and relationships with plants – which led to the presence of a medicinal herb garden and of "ecological" praxis and discourse.

Nurtured by access to a forum like PAF and MASSIA-in-becoming, the interest was also to participate in an "elsewhere and otherwise". As a fem person of colour, with a working class background, experience of forced migration, poverty, and further marginalisation – the vision of alternatives to found a spatial practice on (like 'doing PAF' or 'doing MASSIA') is a different one to that of Jan's positionality.

This might be one of the essential differences between the two places. For the sake of illustration, we want to simplify those to the contraposition of:
PAF = a place for production outside of institutional markets

MASSIA = a place aiming to be attentive to the asymmetrical possibilities for re/production

Like often the case, PAF started from an illusion that we all come to it from the same place. This recognition has changed since. Practices which acknowledge and work against structural asymmetries are forming very slowly – and are still in lineage of, and struggling with, white, hetero-patriarchal, owning/middle-class privileges.

MASSIA shares less of that lineage, it started earlier on from the recognition of asymmetries in access and privilege, of injustice that is also reproduced in our spaces – and: that nobody will change it for us, except us. This understanding manifests for example in explicitly asking all visitors to contribute one hour per day to collective maintenance. The co-organisation doesn't divide into productive and reproductive labor. As of next year, a more nuanced sliding scale price policy will be implemented. One could see this as a consequence of scales: PAF's scale might be too big to build a coherent body of political beliefs which are less abstract than the guiding four principles. Fewer people involved make it sometimes easier to find political consent.

Currently, and for the last six years, only Sepideh is living permanently in MASSIA. In other words, the majority of conceptual, practical and administrative maintenance is being held by one single person. The few people who co-organise MASSIA nowadays live further away and require more complex planning and financial resources to be able to do so.

From 2022 on, MASSIA breaks even in terms of income and expense balance, due to tight budgeting and on a precarious level. A precarity which makes it difficult to pay for participants' labor, for necessary repairs to the building, and for improvements of its facilities. MASSIA's financial precarity means that it cannot pay for the practical commitment it requires to sustain. Additionally, it lacks active supporters who pull a critical mass of visitors, which in return generate income and more participants. In other words, MASSIA has not yet built a collective body which is able to distribute the labor of running the project in a sustainable way.

Visioning

Which brings us to the practical intentions of this text: Sepideh has announced their exit from a central position of organising MASSIA. With this, they are making space for others to step in and more radically/sustainably distribute "ownership" in its self-organisation.

This is a call for participation in co-organising MASSIA, addressed to PAF participants.

We lean into the already existing imagination of PAF, MASSIA, and their networks – people, places, practices – as rehearsal grounds for alternative worldbuilding, and for further developing a *currency of participation.*

We build little pockets or ecosystems within which we can make proposals for alternatives. This is carried in the ways we distribute labor and responsibility among us, the economies we propose, the ways we give, take and make space. We have a chance here to transform the principles which underlie any of the activities that running these spaces require: to try for non-oppressive, non-extractive possibilities.

Doing this in a networked way, in the company of more spaces that cultivate the realisation of these possibilities, will make our work stronger. It might grow a bigger community of people interested in participating in that worldbuilding – beyond the timespaces PAF, MASSIA and others mark. Building the capacity to sustain this work, and to propagate a principle of participation (vs. consumption, extraction, etc.), aims also towards participation in the labor and care work that sustains life 'outside'.

With PAN Forum, Lucas and some conspirators have initiated a process of networking various autonomous spaces. It didn't manage to take off - yet. Mainly due to lack of energy as most projects struggle with resources: financial as well as a lack of participants.

It would be necessary to further invent structures, economies, practices that enable these spaces and their users to sustain one another. Networks that make membership and participation more possible and participants who make the spaces more possible. Like a commons that is based on reciprocity.

From MASSIA we look towards PAF and wish for a similar pull of participants. *We also wish for more places like PAF and MASSIA to collaborate and vitalize their exchanges, and to grow concrete networked structures; and we wish for more accessibility.*

PAF was always carried by curiosity towards the question "how do we want to live together?" How to produce together, how to think together, how to act together, how to hold space together? Jan was probably the loudest (and cringe-freest) to proclaim a vision for an autonomous people, enabled to make free choices and to build a more just world.

In that sense, PAF & MASSIA are also spaces where abstract, idealistic visions meet practical and material needs. The house is kept running through a continuous commitment to administration and maintenance, and with people who not only talk, but also act and are literally not afraid of shit. We see a practice beyond the division of the head and the hand, in which utopian ideas begin right here, right now.