



# Learning as movement

## An essay by Silvia Bottiroli on BOK

### Artikel

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Silvia Bottiroli, visited *BOK on foot* in March, 2021. *BOK on foot* emerged during the lock-down because of COVID-19, in 2021. For more than six months, all meetings outside the family circle were prohibited. What was still allowed was walking, outside, with a maximum of four people. During that period, *BOK tent* was transformed into *BOK on foot*: a peripatetic school, where one could learn from a body of knowledge while walking. *BOK on foot* was identified by a red parasol that meant, in all weather conditions: 'this is a place to learn from each other.'

#### About learning

Learning is a continuous process. It is situational and relational. We learn within, via, with and sometimes against the social contexts that we live in, and we only learn in relation to others. It is not surprising that facilitating learning environments is attractive to artists, especially if their work engages societal issues and does not shy away from the inner politicality of artistic and cultural work. It is rare, though, that artists commit to facilitating a long-term learning environment, especially in a working field based on overproduction, where artists are constantly asked for 'the next thing' and tend to accumulate projects rather than lingering with one single work. Yet, learning requires time.

In this sense, *bodies of knowledge (BOK)* is a very precious work. Initiated by artist Sarah Vanhee and lead together with a group of collaborators (Damla Ekin Tokel, Flore Herman, Nouha Mhamdi, Luisa Marc, Nadia Mharzi, Cillian O'Neill and Jean-Baptiste Polge), it started in Brussels and is expanding to other cities -involving dozens of participants from very diverse backgrounds and positions in society. It is a resilient and obstinate project based on consistent commitment. *BOK* addresses the intrinsic relationality of learning as in generating and sharing knowledges, and approaches it with the aim to challenge the inequalities reproduced by the current organization of society. Just by flipping over the expected profiles of the ones who take the floor to share their knowledge, and the ones who stay silent, listen and eventually ask questions, it proposes a radically different cosmology of learning. What are the bodies that carry with them a knowledge that is useful, or even necessary, to orientate ourselves in the times we are living now? What are the voices that we need to hear and listen to? What stories can they tell, if they get the opportunity to speak up? These are just some of the political questions that *BOK* raises, by inviting individuals who do not fit into the norm of what is considered knowledgeable to speak up their truths, experiences, beliefs and proposals, and by inviting anyone who likes to sign up for an artistic work or who is taking a stroll in a park to spend some time with a 'body of knowledge' and listen to them.

Learning, though, is always mutual. Not only do we learn in relation to others: we do learn together. The learning sometimes springs from the most unexpected places, people and experiences, and not always the one who is learning is the one who is assigned the position of the learner. This is very tangible in formal education, but also in informal sites for sharing and exchange, such as collectives, collaborative processes, friendship, parenting, art making and spectatorship.

*BOK* does not present itself as a school but as 'a place for learning together', and by focussing on the mutual action of learning rather than on the infrastructure that meant to facilitate it, it invites to consider which different shapes a learning process can take, within and beyond the domain of contemporary, relational artistic practices. It articulates itself into multiple forms and situations, like for example *BOK tent*, *BOK phone* and *BOK on foot*. This latter form in particular, proposes a simple, everyday practice -the walking- as a site where encounters can unfold, implicating bodies in an action that provides a certain rhythm and a sense of movement.

Indeed, *BOK* functions as a collective project where agency is enhanced and shared, trust is built and secured, and transmission becomes very concrete. This gets activated from the start, with Sarah Vanhee as the initiating artist immediately opening up *BOK* to collaborators. This ripples then from collaborators to 'bodies of knowledge', making *BOK* an ongoing practice embodied by many, and in the end a long-term trajectory that transcends the temporality of an art project in favour of the creation of a support structure. A light, yet stable infrastructure is in fact created, that operates outside artistic institutions and, when collaborating with them, also confronts them with the proposal of an organization supporting the development of a shared practice rather than asking the practice to fit into existing institutional frameworks. As such, *BOK* interrogates how to work within existing contexts as well as to create new ones, and whose structures can support a learning environment that may last and evolve beyond the original impulse that started it.

#### The ones who are learning

Whenever a learning environment is facilitated, the question: "Who is learning here?" is very legitimate, and often brings us interesting discoveries. In formal education, it is indeed very rare that an organization, a teacher or a facilitator of a learning process admits that they are learning too -meaning that they have something to learn about what and how they are supporting others in this learning process, and ultimately about themselves. As if being professional means having all the answers, and learning becoming a one-way relationship, while we all know it is not. Moreover, normally a formal learning process implicates two distinct positions, the one of the learner and the one of the teacher. Which role each of them plays and what they should expect from each other are questions answered univocally, in ways that prevent them from exchanging positions or renegotiating them in relation to one another.

One of the radical shifts that *BOK* proposes is indeed to create a third position in this relationship, therefore multiplying the possible ways through which each individual can relate to the others and to oneself. A triangle is made by the artist/ *BOK* collaborators, the participants/ 'bodies of knowledge' and the visitors/ learners, but these positions are not fixed and so learners can become 'bodies of knowledge' or collaborators and collaborators or 'bodies of knowledge' can also become learners... This generates an increased circulation of knowledge and an enhanced relationality between the individuals that are meeting each other to share some time, a walk; and a conversation. While the individual positions of the 'bodies of knowledge' and their guests are not meant to be questioned or flipped over for the duration of their encounter, being part of a larger programme of several walks and of a broader community makes them more aware of the positions that they are in and how they may differ from the ones they more often find themselves in -in everyday life. As the theatrical apparatus has proved -since its very origin- that there is a political stance whenever we are made aware of the position that we stand or sit in, and can observe ourselves being in it. The theatre is not only a place for watching what is presented or represented 'on stage', but also a place for watching ourselves watching together with others, and for watching how we are positioned in relation to what

we watch as well as to each other. In a similar way, *BOK on foot* creates a relational device where the 'learning together' also becomes an excuse to raise some points about the current norm of both the 'learning' and the 'together'. "What are the contexts in which we know that we are learning, or what we are supposed to be learning?" Is it where the learning -which matters the most- really happened to us? All of it? And, what are other sites for learning? How can we -by ourselves- create and implement them? When, where, with whom and how have we learnt something that stayed with us for a longer period of time? What was our body feeling in that moment? What kind of bodily memories and feelings do we associate with those experiences? And, also, what are the bodies, the stories, the life experiences, the positions that we are more often exposed to? What other bodies, stories, life experiences and positions stay invisible or silenced, and why? What forms are possible to propose and support a different platform of encounter and exchange, where people do not come together on the basis of what they already know they share with each other, but where a connection is made via the elementary gesture of walking side by side, speaking and listening? This set of questions explores but does not exhaust the intertwined emotions and thoughts that are set in motion by the experience of the learning relationship proposed by *BOK on foot*, in times and places that are not formally devoted to a learning process and with people whose knowledge we may not know we are interested in, or may find difficult to integrate, or may indeed find eye-opening and truly meaningful.

The gentle presence of an artistic team behind the project is extremely important in how the relationship gets started and in how each individual participant can step into it. In the first place, trust is being built by the relationship between the team and the 'bodies of knowledge': a sense of dignity and a sense of the value of one's own experience and knowledge, are the basis upon which the whole work develops itself. Trust is also built between the artistic team and the learner participants: a connection with unknown individuals happens in very different circumstances when it is inscribed into or framed as an artistic work, rather than any other kind of activity. Invitations may happen in the street, via particular networks or associations, within personal lives and connections... What art does here - as in a number of other projects that, like *BOK*, aim to be active in the world beyond the artistic domain- is to create a frame that allows for exceptions that manifest themselves and get experienced. A frame of trust and conventional agreements which creates a certain safety. A discursive frame that makes the spectators more receptive and open for an encounter, and thus make the whole experience more conducive.

The invitation to participate in *BOK* -either as a 'body of knowledge' or as a guest- sets dynamics in motion that are about making an unusual step and taking the chance of something that we cannot know in detail beforehand -adopting a position which is not necessarily our usual one.

### **A place for learning together**

*BOK on foot* positions itself in the public space and inhabits it gracefully and gently. A red beach umbrella, a poster, a blanket on the grass, a box with paper sheets and some friendly young women talking to each other, to their guests and to the passers-by that occasionally stop and ask some questions. The central site of the work is just a signifier of what *BOK on foot* proposes, and is not even a centre, but rather a place holder, a way of saying "We are here", an invitation for anyone, anybody, to come closer. This 'place for learning together' is indeed not a particular space but just of temporary use, or *queer use*, of an existing, public, outdoor space in the middle of a lively neighborhood of a big European city. The red beach umbrella could indeed be anywhere. Any place can be a place for learning together, any public space is or should be available for everybody to meet, exchange, talk, listen, walk, stand still or sit on the ground for a moment.

This space-signifier is also just the point of departure and arrival for the cyclical walks that the 'bodies of knowledge' took with their guests across Josaphat Park in Schaarbeek, where *BOK on foot* took place. Just an excuse for that walk to happen, and just a place where thoughts and feelings can get deposited afterwards and where further iterations could start. Indeed, the hanging paper sheets are a "*BOK* question list" that addresses a collection of questions to possible new 'bodies of knowledge': a series of knowledges that people may have and want to share with others within this work, a collection of invisible knowledges that are there in the city. They range very broadly from practical skills to philosophical concepts, touching multiple in-betweens from... to and from... to...

This space is just a starting point from where the participants take off for a walk. Beyond being just a simple, everyday practice, walking is a posture, a way of carrying oneself into the world, a pace, a relation to time as rhythm and to time as duration. These walks happen to be circular in the end, although they can take many paths and explore the park in all its directions. It is the space of the work itself that invites for a circularity: a clear point of arrival that coincides with a point of departure. The learning indeed is not about moving from one place to another, but just about movement. There is something meditative in the pace and shape of the walks that the *BOK on foot* participants take together throughout the park, especially for the 'bodies of knowledge' that repeat their walk more than once in a day and for the learners that sign up for more than one encounter. Walking together provides a peculiar form for being intimate with a stranger, and zooms in on the one-on-one relationship: the park is still there as a landscape to be crossed and contemplated, and the project itself is still a background offering structure and safety, but a sphere is created that belongs only to those who are walking along each other and that has a certain degree of autonomy. It is about us, you and me. It is about this experience that we are sharing. It is about the words that are being said and listened to. Every walk is a new beginning, a radically different story. Every circle that the participants take into the park, or into any other public space, is where and when it starts and ends for them. Every walk is an entirely new journey, although it does not come with any promise of novelty but rather offers its repetitive nature as a comforting framework for defenses to fall down and encounters to happen.

### **A layered time**

*BOK* is a long-term process, with a focus on what happens in between its different, visible manifestations. We would get a very partial picture of this work if we would only see its iterations in the various locations and cities where it has been activated. Most of the work and of the learning happens indeed in other places and times. The moment the team encounters a potential 'body of knowledge' for the first time, while looking for invisible knowledge in the city -the glimpse of a possibility, the trigger of a conversation. The time a body works with the team and 'rehearses' their story, the maieutic process of letting the body's knowledge emerge and speak its truth and the dramaturgical process of organizing it into a spoken word piece to be shared during a walk. The time of the actual 'performance', the encounter with a number of participants as learners, the sharing of time in the space of a park, paced by the act of walking together side by side. The time after, how the words and the body posture, the proximity, the tones of a voice, the gazes, the ways of carrying oneself into the world stay and resonate with the spectators soon after, when they keep walking in order to leave the park, and move to the next thing or go back home. And, they find themselves having a different mental space, different thoughts and feelings. And the time long after that, when words, emotions, experiences keep coming up unexpectedly, and the vividness of that time shared with an unknown fellow human being shades a different light upon the everyday life.

These multiple layers of time are indeed connected by a sense of continuity which is produced mostly by the obstinate repetition of the walks and stories, over and over again. The act of walking, one step after the other, the same repeated movement, leaves an extra sense of density to this continuity. Something that just happens and happens again, which keeps on going and moves us forward -even when we are just walking in circles in the park.

## Learning as movement

Because of the ways in which *BOK* articulates the artistic and political stances that I tried to unfold in the previous paragraphs, it would be hard to push this work into the status of just 'a project'. The sense of time that it proposes is indeed very different, oriented to the present as the only site where the past can be repaired and where a desire of future can spring which is not a sheer speculation nor a reproduction of the known, but a new, rooted and yet freed time. Proposing a shift from the temporality of the project to duration and continuity, comes here with a focus on sustainability and how it can only be achieved in collaborative practices; with letting go of the fetish of individual authorship in favour of an holistic understanding of facilitation as an active process based on making space; with giving voice and utilizing the arts as a field where voices can matter, voices that are often marginalized in other domains of the political and cultural life of contemporary Western societies.

The duration that is at stake here is not at all a static, stable and immobile concept though. The act of walking, although suggested by circumstances at its start, is constitutive of a practice that is based on a strong commitment to work as collective labour and unfolds into a *movement*. The core is about setting oneself, others and some things in motion. Surrendering to the desire to move and be moved, making a step, losing one's balance for a moment and finding it again just a moment after, following somebody else's rhythm, tuning in with the environment and its multiple scores (people walking, children playing, laughs, yells, birds singing, dogs barking...). This is all part of the movement that engages those who participate in *BOK on foot*, either as 'bodies of knowledge' or as learners.

By setting oneself and others in motion, a larger movement is produced, that ripples way beyond the time of the encounter and the space of the park, visibly and invisibly. The collective movement that the *BOK* learners produce in the park itself, is setting other things in motion. While their doings (meeting each other, walking together, talking and listening, greeting each other at the end) is mimetic to the environment of a city park. The repetition of these actions and the particular circularity that they produce over the time of one day (and of several days), subtly transforms these everyday practices into something else. Not something radically different, just something slightly different, not fitting to the patterns of reality as it normally gets framed: the reality of social interactions, of the shared use of public space, of the coming together and parting from each other.

Whenever the scores of reality are enriched and complexified by other scores, new textures, new cracks, and in-between spaces can emerge -and with them unpredictable possibilities to navigate this reality, to linger in it, and to break through it... opening spaces in it, letting things pass-by and changing its structure and form.

The ultimate proposal of *BOK* seems indeed to be a shift from project to work, and from an art piece to a movement. As any other collective movement, it aims to be multiple, polyvocal, and therefore uncontrollable, unpredictable and unstoppable. Perhaps, the movements that cannot be stopped are indeed the movements that appear as harmless and minimal. The voices that are not raised to speak to a crowd, but make themselves heard by one person at a time. The bodies that come together according to the unwritten rules of social encounters and who do not stand out. The practices that inhabit the public spaces without seeming to occupy it for a specific purpose. The work that does not produce immediate change but keeps digging a hole that can lead to watery or underground worlds. The stories that are not unforeseen and science-fictional but are just being silenced by the set of rules and conventions that produce the norms of how we live together. The encounters that are not impossible yet are not facilitated by the ways societies are organized. The paths that are not meant to cross but can indeed cross and invite for other walks, detours, come-backs... .

A movement is sustained when agency is shared. When many recognize themselves in it and feel that they are part of it. When nobody claims authorship even when an individual agency is needed. When a practice becomes collective and is extended in time beyond what it is normatively assumed to be its duration. It is sustained when we stay. When we listen and ask questions that matter, even when they are not easy questions. When we shut up. Walk a bit slower. Walk a bit faster. Forget about our own rhythm, our own measure, and surrender to the one of somebody else. When we speak up when we have to. Look each other in the eyes. Go into the world along with others, not necessarily because we agree on something or are on the same side of something. When we carry our bodies into the public space and our wounds with them, our vulnerabilities, our fears, failures, hopes, dreams. When we release into the posture of the one who is learning, the beginner, the uneducated, the ignorant. When we let go of the performativity of knowing and surrender to the pleasure and marvel of not knowing. What kind of community could a community of learners create? What does it say about the ways we live and work together, in and beyond the artistic domain? What about the ways we would want to live and work together, especially now that we all discovered ourselves to be failing, to be vulnerable, ruled by fear, striving to regain motivation, generosity, hope and trust?

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## About

***Bodies of knowledge (BOK)* is a place for people to learn from each other. Things one usually does not learn, told by voices who are not always heard, from different parts of society and the world. In *BOK* we try to exchange knowledge that nurtures a more just and humane society. It's a room for listening, questioning, connecting. *BOK* welcomes life experts rather than professional authorities.**

*BOK* is a nomadic class-room, shared amongst co-learners. It can be found in different public spaces. *BOK* is a place for the exchange of non-dominant, underexposed and/or suppressed knowledge. It's intergenerational and inclusive (by at times being exclusive). *BOK* suspends dominant visions on what knowledge is and how it can be exchanged, contributing to a society that is socially just, generative instead of exploitative and ecologically sustainable, in a world that includes the human and the non-human. *BOK* is a multi-linguistic and transcultural place with a poly-centric world view and alternative, embodied learning as connective tissue. In *BOK* we try to speak from positions we are maybe not necessarily used to speak from and try to subvert the usual order in which voices are being heard. *BOK* is a polyphonic room for questioning, for learning to learn from below, where we are open to different kinds and forms of knowledge and we all know that we don't know.

## Credits

**conception** Sarah Vanhee | **coordination** Flore Herman, Damla Ekin Tokel, Jean-Baptiste Polge, Nadia Mharzi & Nouha Mhamdi | **in collaboration with** different 'bodies of knowledge' living in Brussels | **production/communication** Luisa Marc / BOK vzw asbl | **technical support** Cillian O'Neill | **administrative support** Caravan Production | **co-production** Kaaitheater, BUDA, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, KASKA/Expanding Academy, Noorderzon Festival of Performing Arts & Society, BIT Teatergarasjen, Reykjavik Dance Festival, Voo?uit & CAMPO | **with the financial support of** the Flemish Community (VG), the Flemish Minister of Brussels - Youth & Media, the Flemish Community Commission (VGC), the French Community Commission (COCOF) | **research** Conservatorium Antwerpen, University of Antwerp (UA) & the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (ARIA)

For more information: [www.bodiesofknowledge.be](http://www.bodiesofknowledge.be) (<https://www.bodiesofknowledge.be/>)

**Silvia Bottiroli**, PhD, is an independent curator, researcher, organizer and educator in the field of performing arts, interested in the intersections between theoretical research, curatorial practices and education, and in the politics of performativity and spectatorship.

She was the artistic director of DAS Theatre in Amsterdam (2018-2021) and of *Santarcangelo Festival* (2012-2016). She curated the program *The May Events* for *KunstenFestivalDesArts* in Brussels and *Vooruit* in Ghent (2018) and co-curated various artistic, discursive, and educational platforms, collaborating among others with *Homo Novus Festival* in Riga and School of Visual Theatre in Jerusalem. Since 2011 she has been teaching *Methodology, Critique, and Research* in the Arts at Bocconi University in Milan and since 2019 she is co-curating together with Kee Hong Low and a new performative platform for Freespace in Hong Kong.

**Expanding Academy**, initiated upon invitation of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp by artist Nico Dockx and curator Judith Wielander, is a new, complementary program of art education and practice-based research in the arts that could inject the institution with different attitudes of activism and render visible cultural imaginations of our contemporary world. The current crisis of education is interconnected with the larger, self-reproducing, socio-economic and political crisis that we are facing everywhere in the world, which also means a crisis of our imagination. *Expanding Academy* wants to focus on collaborative practices and artistic experiences that build communities, raise social understandings, and encourage new forms of solidarity which could improve our living conditions. A micro-scale program in the arts with an experimental and versatile profile that focuses on pluri-versal and transdisciplinary research methods, collective learning and new modalities of exchange based on reciprocity and self-organization. We strongly believe that both the skeleton as well as the different organs of this program should consist of a challenging mix of (maybe even contradicting) artistic practices that prepare us for an ecological, sustainable and socially just future.

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