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# Little learning. On BOK (bodies of knowledge)

3599 words

Sarah Vanhee and team's BOK (bodies of knowledge) is an improbable marvel, a gem. It raises a space for the ongoing and yet simultaneously rare experience of listening and learning in midst of social life, and it achieves this feat, I suspect, through its uncompromising devotion to a peculiar superlative: "the simplest."

I am currently on the train back to London after having spent the afternoon at BOK, which is currently established in Square Jacques Brel in the city centre of Brussels; to be sure, one afternoon is a comically short amount of time for exploring BOK, given that the work, the labour that is BOK unfolds over a timeframe of months and years. I understand that Vanhee conceived of BOK in late 2018, early 2019 when she was in the early stages of her artistic PhD at Antwerp School of Arts; the project has since manifested in a 2019 try-out in Manchester as well as several iterations in Brussels that took place from the second half of 2020 onwards; further instalments in other countries and cities are foreseen for 2022 and after (check out <https://www.bodiesofknowledge.be> (<https://www.bodiesofknowledge.be>) for details).

The long-term effort of BOK, its engaging with local communities for a duration of at least a few months, was briefly up in the air in early 2021: COVID-19 policies in Belgium forbid social gatherings, but the team around Vanhee reacted by reinventing BOK in novel forms. The red, blue, and green tent, which originally hosted the collective knowledge exchange, was briefly substituted for the mobile "BOK on foot." In this walking practice, a single body of knowledge, as the person wanting to share their knowledge is being identified, took a stroll through town with a single participant (Silvia Bottioli wrote an essay on BOK on foot for the Kaaitheater website that is available here: <https://www.kaaitheater.be/en/articles/learning-as-movement> (<https://www.kaaitheater.be/en/articles/learning-as-movement>); Kaaitheater is one of the co-producers of BOK). Additionally, a phone service was set up with bodies of knowledge answering calls from curious listeners.

These temporary changes to BOK not only signal the sustained commitment to a local community that might depend on alternate forms of learning all the more as they are being confronted with the unknown circumstance of a pandemic; it likewise suggests that BOK's artistic form is in effect secondary to its use, the latter being circumscribed by Vanhee as aspiring to a practice of freedom, which takes its cue from bell hooks' pedagogy of hope. Take this unambiguous passage from a text that Vanhee published toward the start of BOK: "We never stop learning. In my radical imagination, a project like BOK which materializes in the city can bring us closer to a tangible future where a school becomes a place for 'the practice of freedom' (bell hooks)." (2019, n.pag.; all following quotations of Vanhee from this source, unless otherwise stated)

What's curious about these few lines is that they introduce the ultimate aim of BOK, the idea of learning as a liberatory practice, with a statement that emphasises a processual nature of learning (if not an endlessness of learning that is ended only by the ends of our lives in death). It doesn't take much to suggest, therefore, that one of the core principles of BOK is that learning and knowing as a radical practice of liberation must itself be learnt over time: it must indeed become a practice, if by

practice we understand not any form of doing, but a doing that is necessarily a learning, a learning of that which you are in the process of doing. To practice is to engage in an activity while at the same time learning to engage in it—at least that is the notion of practice that has come to dominate contemporary theatre, dance, and performance. The ubiquitous rhetoric of practice in contemporary performing arts, and the arts more generally, has to do with this learning-doing, which the German neatly summons in the composite of *Aus-Übung* or *Aus-Üben*: to practice is to exercise, to rehearse, to try out, and at the same time it is to execute, to enact, to carry out. We might go so far as to say that the freedom of practice, and a practice of freedom, revolves precisely around the tension and interstice, around the irreconcilable friction between these two poles.

BOK therefore participates in a contemporary tendency that reaches far beyond the immediate context of learning and education, infiltrating instead any kind of artistic activity and turning activity as such into a matter of learning, or indeed learning to be free. In this sense, BOK has an almost paradigmatic function and relevance for contemporary performance and art: it folds practice as learning back into the realm of learning as practice, in order to highlight their contemporary interrelation.

What makes Vanhee and team's process special, though, is how it pursues such liberatory practice of freedom. This "how," this again decisively practical aspect of BOK, is ultimately much more important than the wider discourse that surrounds the project, which is infused with widely known narratives and tropes from 20th century leftist, activist, and artistic experiments in alternative pedagogy. Vanhee talks of BOK as a space where everyone can learn from each other; a space where there is no teacher-pupil separation but a collective of co-learners; where there is no hierarchy, but a horizontal plane of knowledge transmission; where we meet in a safe and soft and radically inclusive environment in which every body will be heard—every body meaning particularly those bodies that have been historically excluded from Western, modern institutions of knowledge, from the schools, the academies, the universities of our past and present.

This discourse is obviously relevant, but I was perhaps a bit disappointed to see Vanhee reiterate its main elements without much new insight—before I understood that the values of originality, of novelty, and ingenuity are quite simply not what is at stake in BOK. First of all, the quest for a liberatory practice and ethics of learning is clearly still as valid as it is unrealised in our time; but more importantly, and in keeping with proponents from feminist, black, and decolonial study, BOK seems to reject the very concept of creative innovation for its historical enactment of epistemological violence: the violence that comes with the modern, post-Enlightenment Subject and its supposedly self-determined creation of knowledge which follows the destruction of the bodies and knowledges that always already existed before and outside the Subject's construction of the world.

Vanhee casts this conviction into her very definition of learning: "'Learning' then means developing what potentially already exists, and transforming it based on an open imagination using the available and new tools, skills and methodologies." Learning, according to this view, is not the production of what are believed to be new knowledges, but it is the actualisation, or perhaps quite simply the rearticulation, a different articulation, that is, of that which is always already given as some kind of knowledge. (I hesitate to affirm Vanhee's use of the phrase "developing potential" as it still harbours the idea of an inability on the part of the knowable to make itself known, and therefore a subject-object hierarchy which operates at the basis of the rationality of the modern Subject. This also brings to mind Mierle Laderman Ukeles' famous definition of development as "pure individual creation", as "the new," "progress," and "change," which Ukeles suggests is creative only insofar as it feeds upon and thus destroys the processes of life that make life liveable in the first place, the maintenance and care of bodies in all their materiality and fragility. Vanhee's bodies of knowledge, it seems to me, are much more aligned with a notion of care, and thus ultimately reject a modern idea of development.) At any rate, for BOK not to invent its own discursive framework, but to side with the given discourses of those who have not been granted discursive access in the first place, is in itself a radical social and ethical gesture of un-learning.

The notion of un-learning is consequentially among those from BOK's "little learning book," a notebook filled with questions, as I understand, that the team uses to approach potential bodies of knowledge on the street. Because this is how BOK mostly finds its voices, its speakers: by going out on the street and asking people whether they would be willing to share some of their knowledge in the BOK tent. "What would you like to un-learn?" "What is a moment of learning you will never forget?," are among the questions that the team first asks to those who stop to talk to them.

These questions are not easy to answer, but stemming from the "little learning book," they are also just that: little questions. The "little" as a specific category seems to signal an artistic approach that is somewhat more explicitly highlighted in Vanhee's account of what led to her choosing the tent as the space where the selected voices from the streets will eventually speak: "A tent is the simplest form of 'enclosure' where people can come together." "The simplest form" states a remarkable superlative, and I would like to think that it is not at all to be conflated with an idea of self-evidence. On the contrary, nothing about the little and the simple in BOK is self-evident, self-explanatory, or natural. In my estimation, Vanhee's words hint toward an art of the simplest that requires a rigorous method, a rigorous decision-making and implementation of the specific how of the desired learning. The tent is not an evident choice, it is a choice that results from a process of selection in which all those options that are not quite simple enough—all those other potential spaces, which might promise, but eventually fail to deliver an experience of learning—have been dismissed. The simplest is the result of an un-doing, and un-learning, of all that which might hinder learning.

BOK's tent is a simple space, first of all, in that it is built of nothing but a metal construction which is covered by plastic tarpaulin in red, blue, and green. In the tent, we find a dozen folding chairs arranged in a circle, a few pillows and blankets, some rugs and lamps, and an electric radiator against the cold. This material scarcity is not an aesthetic celebration of poverty, however, but it is simple in an effort to be accessible. The tent, in how it is not built of stones and walls, is a porous space. It does not emanate the daunting vibe of a monumental university building, but it indicates openness by the sheer simplicity of how easy it is to take a peek at what's going on inside and to enter the space (a ramp also allows for wheelchair access). Plus, it is historically speaking a predominantly popular space, a space that does not belong to high culture and the bourgeoisie, but to ordinary people, just like the circus, of which the colourful design of BOK's tent is a subtle reminder.

The gesture of invitation is also quite literally extended by team members of BOK who approach passers-by and hand them a flyer that lists the programme of the learning sessions scheduled for the day. The flyer itself, its layout and typography is another puzzle piece in the art of the little, of the simple: it is carefully designed to give off an amateurish, almost childlike quality, as the paper comes in monochrome colours such as yellow or turquoise, the used fonts used are either remarkably ordinary or resemble the early unappealing Microsoft WordArt, and the coloured lines across the page look as if they were inserted with Microsoft Paint. Instead of a corporate identity and professional design language, BOK chooses the quick and dirty look that supports the idea of accessibility and openness; it clearly brings across the message that BOK is not a place of specialised knowledge and technique, but a place that welcomes particularly the dilettante, the person that engages in an activity and generates knowledge first and foremost for the sake of joy, as the etymology of dilettantism suggests.

It is not a coincidence, therefore, that Vanhee repeatedly describes herself as a "dilettante at everything" (2019 and Vanhee/Herman 2021, 45) as well as a non-disciplinary artist. The dilettantish as another expression of a simplest art can be said to be the devotion to an attitude of not-knowing, or never-quite-knowing, as the very condition of knowing—and of experiencing the joy of knowing, which might in itself come close a sense of freedom. At the same time, the dilettantish suggests that every knowledge is valued in BOK, particularly the kind of knowledge that does not derive from a professional education, but the kind that is gathered in ordinary life, the lived and embodied experience of making it through the day, of living in a city, of socially interacting in and building a commu-

nity. When I was present, a woman and mother of three talked about her using sport as a device to stay fit every day, her daily having to walk her children to a school three kilometres away because she does not have enough money for public transport.

When people become bodies of knowledge, when they give a presentation in the tent, which usually lasts for about one hour, a Q&A included, they are not being introduced in terms of their qualifications, their degrees or their status in society. Instead, they are welcomed as the bearers of an embodied knowledge, in terms of their lived and practical experience that defines their voice. And to be able to give space to and hear that voice, BOK follows a set of rules that a team member recalls at the beginning of each session, but that is also displayed on paper sheets hung up in the tent. Among these rules is the emphasis that BOK "is a place for listening as much as for speaking," the demand for mutual respect, and the rejection of any form of violence or discrimination. Perhaps more clearly than any other element of BOK, these rules testify to the fact that the simplest art of listening and learning can only exercise itself on the basis of choices and responsibilities. To simply listen to each other and learn requires a precise framing and collective effort of letting go of everything that is anything but simple; this does not come automatically, but it is a question of a practice and an ethics of how to be with and relate to each other.

And yet, the simplicity of BOK might rely on another factor that is not principally ethically derived. If BOK indeed manages to establish a space where we can simply listen to and learn from each other freely, a space where all the bullshit of qualifications and professionalism, of societal recognition by institutions and their sanctions of violence are successfully averted; if BOK indeed promises to be the place of learning that the school or university only happen to be against all odds, against their own design to the contrary, then this rare feat might have to do, still, with the fact that it is a project of art. The artistic framework namely allows for an exchange of knowledge that is at least partly suspended from the sphere of purposes, even social and moral purposes. In the artistic space of BOK, we meet as a random and temporary community, and we share nothing but the will to engage in a practice of learning. We do not need to agree with each other, we do not need to find a common denominator, we do not need to apply the circulating knowledge to a common problem or situation from our lives, but we can freely engage in the transmission of knowledge for the mere purpose of practicing knowledge.

To be sure, this is not to suggest that this freedom is the effect of an unreserved autonomy of art, because it relies precisely on the social arrangements that I mentioned just before. We seem to have to do, rather, with an art situated firmly in the social, using social devices such as an explicit set of rules so that the space of art can first emerge as space of a certain purposelessness. It is from there that knowledges can be heard and shared which might eventually feed back into the social, but in ways that BOK, the art project, does not anticipate or prescribe.

Finally, in this relation between art and the social, a specifically theatrical convention of space and scenery as well as attention is involved. The tent of BOK being situated in a public square, one might think that it serves as a public stage, a stage for the public to represent itself to itself in its multiple knowledges. But this is counteracted, once more, by BOK's emphasis on the simple and little. BOK, the tent, is in fact rather small, it is a little tent, which cannot house a sizeable portion of the public, but only 20, perhaps 30 participants, 40 if you really want to push it. It is too intimate to be a public space. Referencing a term from Brecht that Hans-Thies Lehmann once highlighted in writing about the Pädagogium and the learning plays, respectively, we could call it a "Theaterchen," a "kleine, bewegliche Form" or a little, flexible form.

Likewise, the Square Jacques Brel, although situated in the city centre, is not a highly frequented and renowned spot of Brussels. Instead, it is one of those slightly shabby, smaller squares where locals might hang out to chat during the day, not a place in which large public gatherings and events would typically take place. This peculiar choice of space and place only makes sense when consider-

ing the following consideration of Vanhee: “we also want to operate invisibly to a large extent, so that we can guarantee people a ‘safe space’. Because not everyone feels comfortable ‘in the spotlight’, and for some people this can even be dangerous.” For this reason, BOK also chooses not to use the public relations network of Kaaitheater, its local co-producer, for advertising the weekly learning sessions.

All of this suggests that BOK does not understand its work as an extension to a bourgeois notion of a public and stage, which performs the idea of a public Subject, the People, as well as its knowledge of Enlightenment, which, in this context, is to be taken in its most literal sense as generating knowledge in and through visibility—a being visible to the Subject as well as being a visible and transparent Subject. Rather, in choosing to locate itself on a small, little square that is enmeshed in the rhythms of daily life, BOK sides with the social bodies as they live in the undercommons, to borrow from Harney/Moten. It is there, in this invisible space—or this space that enacts its own visibilities—, that listening and learning and knowing can and do always already take place, but at the same time cannot take place because they are constantly being rendered impossible by the many effects of the profession, the institution, the school, the professors, and so on. Which is why the work of BOK, the work of un-doing to arrive at a simplest space, is necessary.

In the meantime, I have arrived at my home in London, and I am wondering where and how further BOKs might be established here in this city. Because BOK is asking to be shared and replicated, as its practice of learning only continues to unfold it as long as it is practiced, by bodies of knowledge everywhere.

PS.: Vanhee and the team are highly aware of the fact that their simplest art of a free practice of learning conjures its very own dilemma. In the openness of learning, in the concentrated effort of listening, and most of all through the ideal and actual ongoingness of learning, through its endlessness, the bodies of knowledge are driven to a point of exhaustion. As Flore Herman, one of Vanhee’s collaborators, puts it: “when I emerge from a discussion where I’ve really listened, I’m full up and exhausted! I can’t talk anymore.” (Vanhee/Herman 2021, 49) Vanhee adds: “It can be exhausting to be listening in life.” (Vanhee/Herman 2021, 47) To maintain the simplest and thus most focussed state of attentiveness required to listen and learn can be extremely draining. Now, much could be said about this problem, for instance, how BOK shares it with many experiments from contemporary practice, contemporary practice again understood in the specific sense outlined above; from a Deleuzian standpoint, we might add that this problem is essentially that of the Schizo whose breakthrough to an unrestricted openness is always in danger of ending in a breakdown. And in the same vein, we would have to ask how the idea of endless learning participates in the contemporary technology of power that, again in Deleuzian terms, controls its bodies precisely because it subjects them, amongst other things, to perpetual training. The real question, therefore, would be what kind of endlessness, what kind of processes and durations we learn and un-learn all the time. It is a question of good and bad infinity, which may come into view, these days, precisely because we find ourselves, on a macro-scale, at the historical juncture of a possible anthropocene or capitalocene breakdown that implies a catastrophic manifestation of finitude.

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