# Conversation with Ying (Wan Ing Que), curator Hamburger Community & Anarchief at Roodkapje

[2200 words edit - should be 1500 words…]

Simon & Katinka: When we created our program around collectivity at Roodkapje, we initially focused on the Hamburger Community, but we opened that up and saw the entire Roodkapje, also with its larger body of volunteers and affiliates, as a collective, to see what’s already happening there… To talk about our part of the story…

Ying: For me, it was great to enter a space that was so focused on collective practice, because I really think this is something that we need to do. Although I have my reservations about this trend. I tend to be a little suspicious of anything that becomes a trend in the art world. Still, I think it’s necessary that we move from the kind of individualist, sole, author, artist to community and collective practice.

Maybe one of my reservations about the residency was that the artists were *made* into a collective. At my first meeting I said to them: “Look, I know you all come from collective practice, but I don’t think this is how a collective is formed. You have been curated, selected by a jury. So this is an unnatural collective. In my experience, that’s not how a collective forms.

I feel that Roodkapje as an organization comes from this very DIY (do-it-yourself) or DIT (do-it-together) attitude. It’s quite underground, coming from punk and queer scenes, and has this collectivity quite woven into its space. Roodkapje as a space has gathered many communities. So I am not sure if a program was necessary to bring collectivity into Roodkapje, and I was not sure what its goal was. What should happen, what should change in the space? If it was to move the Hamburger Community from individual work to collective practice, great - and you both succeeded, and thank you, it’s very nice to work like that.

The organization itself however is already very community based. It’s not an anarchist space. There is a lot of self-organization, but we have a director, we have these existing hierarchies, there are the volunteers and then there is a floor manager. And there’s the question of who gets paid. But I am not sure if that was the intention, if they wanted to break certain hierarchies, if they wanted to bring in more self-organization from the space itself.

Katinka: Collective practice is very, very different from institutional practice. But what exactly is this difference? How can we pinpoint it, but also help each other find common ground? I am not sure what we did for the organization, but I think we asked some questions, looking for the kind of frictions between collective and institutional practice, and how this could also be played out within Roodkapje as an organization.

Ying: What you’re saying about the violence between institutional time and community time, and how to find common ground in that-that’s a big question. I have a lot of these discussions, especially with the young artists who work in the Burgertrut and the bar, etc., because they say, “Yes, the institution, and this and that…!” Roodkapje, of course, is an institution. But if you compare it to, say, a museum or a white cube, I think that barely applies to it. In Roodkapje’s culture there is an art program, but I can’t compare it to a highbrow art institution. The level of institutional pressure is of course high, because we are under capitalism. It is an institutional problem. Roodkapje’s problem is the funding cycle.

Katinka: That’s exactly what came out of our work. That Roodkapje itself is caught in a logic of production.

Simon: The pressure to produce in Roodkapje also became a pressure on the community. That meant that after the events, including the community events, there was no time for reflection processes.

Ying: I really think that this is not a problem of Roodkapje. It’s an institutional problem because of the economy we live in. It’s a huge problem, so I don’t think you can really solve it. But the real question is about what we have in common, because that’s what it’s all about…

Katinka: What actually connects us, even if we have the same jobs in different institutions…

Ying: Exactly. Why do these volunteers come and want to spend their time in this space? What brings you together? What binds you? There is a common ground that brings people there. And maybe people do not really want to have these soup sessions, for example! Because with the new volunteer coordinator we noticed that those soup sessions were not very well attended by the volunteers. So what is it that volunteers want to do together?

So I think this question of common ground is really important, and the question of having time for reflection is a general problem of capitalism. I always try to slow the f… down. It’s really difficult. But I think there are loopholes.

It’s not just the funding cycles that trap us, because we also have a lot of super passionate, committed people. There is a lack of space in the city to organize things, so the demand for Roodkapje as a space from the outside is also really high. And the people who come to us are great people, they want to do amazing things. So you want to help them all, until you realize: oh wait, we actually don’t have the capacity, but now I’ve planned five events a week. And then people start grinding, and not even because there is pressure from the funding bodies, but because you really want to give people space to do amazing things. Now I put a sticker in the office that says: “If you feel no, say no” (laughs).

Katinka: There’s also a question about Roodkapje’s responsibility as a cultural organization…

Ying: I think that cultural and arts institutions and organizations have a great responsibility to facilitate activism. On that note, I would also like to say that activism is such a broad concept and container of many things. What I am particularly interested in in terms of activism is the self-organizing part, in the sense of: how do we build independent infrastructures that are alternative, that are independent of the state and the market? Because if the revolution comes and we don’t have the opportunity to do that, then we’re just going to go back to the way things were.

So that’s one part of activism I’m interested in, building and experimenting with the alternative. And then there’s the other part, which is organizing. Organizing, I think, has a more collective purpose than activism. Activism can be any person who goes to a protest with a sign and then posts it on Instagram. I’m more interested in the organizing part, where there’s a clear politicization of people, a clear bringing together of people for political struggle, doing political education, and activating people to become part of the fight, for whatever it is - whether it’s for housing or for solidarity.

So in these two areas I think Roodkapje has an interesting role to play. Because I feel that within art and culture there’s an imagination that’s necessary to find out what these alternatives will be, what these experiments will look like.

But how can we learn from each other through this exchange of knowledge and also implement it infrastructurally? I think the commons is an important approach, especially when it comes to economics, that there are alternative economies. And I think an art institution can be a commons.

I came to Rotterdam to connect political organizations with the cultural sector and have them interact, to bring more social practice and have social practice be part of the space.

Katinka: What do you exactly mean by social practice?

Ying: Social practice is actually people working together who may not necessarily be artists, or where what they’re producing is not necessarily a work of art.

I have always been a community organizer, bringing different communities together and using the art space for them to have access. And to connect with the artists and their work, to align the campaigns and programs, and to do research together. A kitchen, communal cooking, is one example. The big idea was to build the shadow economy, apart from the state, for care, housing, food, and art, as common pool resources. And then bring collectives together to see how to do that. Ideally, they would all connect, and you would have a little shadow economy in the city. But that was a long-term plan….

Simon: In one of our previous conversations, I remember that you brought up the term “toxic collectivity”…

Ying: Really?!?

Katinka: I think you were responding to two members from the POST Collective, one from Libya and one from Egypt, who used that term when talking about the collectivist societies they come from. In their interpretation of the term, a collective can also mean that you are not free and that the whole group decides what you can and can’t do. This has been described by them as “toxic”.

Ying: One thing I really appreciated from that conversation, which I still use now to check myself, is that they said you have to be aware of where the fertile ground is. Which is so obvious, but when they said it, it just stayed with me: If you want to flourish, you need to find the fertile ground. If you are not feeling energized, if you are not feeling appreciated, if you are feeling disappointed, then the ground is toxic and you need to leave. That totally stuck with me, like: YES, check your soil, it’s real…

I came from a burnout. Not necessarily just from collective practice, but from a lot of things. But what I learned from that is that it is really important to address the romanticization of collective practice.

A lot of people who want to become a collective forget that there are a lot of structures and strategies and methods. Coming from anarchist organizing myself, our trainings were filled with things like, “How do you facilitate a meeting”? It really goes into super-basic things like: how do you make a good agenda? What are the roles? How do you rotate? How do you build commitment? When you think about consensus process, how do you make sure everyone is heard? How do you make decisions?

There are a host of methods and structures that are super-basic that I think art has skipped over. When I was teaching in an art academy, the Dutch Art Institute, I also noticed that it was skipped, this basic method of how to run a meeting, you know? I’ve seen it so many times that a project is started and a great conversation is going on but it’s not recorded and there’s no note taking and there’s no process afterwards like “hey, what did we talk about”…

Simon: Yes…

Ying: That’s one part that I think is missing from collective practice in art, a lot. The other part is toxic collectivity. Where I don’t know if it comes from art - but it’s just my experience that there is a reproduction of what has been imposed on us, that we also reproduce capitalism in ourselves. We have internalized certain things and have to unlearn them. And then there’s the question for any community organizer who’s building a collective practice and bringing communities together: what happens when you leave? This is always a big question, even for artists doing community work. If the artist is not there, does the practice continue?

This is something that became very clear to me, that I was carrying way too much. I started dropping balls, and then the people I was working with couldn’t carry. And then I had a huge disappointment, like, oh my God, my collective just collapsed, how is that possible? There was a practice that went on, that survived. I left and it’s still going on.

I think that’s a big question for organizations and for artists: to check your role. Is it just you who keeps people together? Is it only because of you that people want to do things? And what is your mistake in not being able to make it sustainable?

So I basically came from this kind of toxic collectivity that maybe I had too high expectations of the members of my collective. So that’s actually more personal… And that can become very toxic because people who get hurt…

Simon: Is there anything you do differently now?

Ying: It’s just recently that I feel like I can come back. I really took a break, a year and a half, from organizing and movement-based work. I feel that in Roodkapje I can now do what I was doing before, in the sense of sharing this space. And that’s happening slowly. But I will do it with care for my personal needs. It sounds really lame, but to understand self-care in a completely different way… Of course everyone talks about self-care. With my experience, I now understand it in the sense of: okay, if you don’t take care of yourself, your community will also collapse. And you have to build a structure where people can fall out and come back.