

EMPOWERING MODELS AND TOOLS OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURAL SPACES

A research for the SOTA Fair Arts Almanac 2022



*What is the impact of artist-run spaces on their users & the people involved?
How does your organisation empower the members of its own and neighbouring networks?
How to empower with collectivization and participation in a fair & sustainable manner*

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A. CONTEXT

Artists have not only been the victims of gentrification processes in large cities worldwide, but for decades (unconsciously) functioned as a driving force from within this scheme. When setting up artist-run working spaces, artists often put a lot of time and energy into their start-up, maintenance and management. Of course, they get many advantages in return: being part of a network and the accompanying exchange, for example, and sometimes, hopefully, affordable space. But does it also strengthen their artistic, economic, social, and/or political position? What models exist that improve the opportunities and conditions of their members, and those of other groups who also struggle with the negative effects of gentrification? What ideas, tools and practices do they have?

In Belgium and internationally, there are places where there is a balance between the energy that is put in and the energy that the people involved get out. How do they do it, how are these places organised? We focus on ideas and solutions rather than on the problems, we will visualise a variety of ideas and models and see in which contexts and conditions they are constructive or productive, are liable to receive support, have a potential of changing the socio-economic fabric of the art world...

***What do artists gain from running an organisation collectively?
How can these collectives empower surrounding actors?***

With SOTA, in the context of the [Fair Arts Almanac 2022](#), we want to point out the role of arts and artists in gentrification processes. Therefore, we look for a better understanding of the methodologies and tools that artists collectives use to empower their members, their audiences, and other networks involved. Here, we present a tool, an online survey, to map the many models that exist for participatory cultural spaces and to visualise the methodologies they use that empower their 'members' with collectivization and participation. The results can be used for policymaking and, maybe more important, to learn from each other.

How to get beyond the instrumentalization of artists in favour of gentrification and participation processes? Self-organising and commons-like initiatives are popping-up like mushrooms, as [a recent research](#) by Oikos and the Koning Boudewijn Stichting shows us. Unfortunately, this overview of bottom-up citizen initiatives did not take in account the cultural sector. With our research we focus on cultural initiatives that govern art spaces in a participatory way.

The main idea is **to get an overview of artist-run spaces in Belgium and to understand better the different types/models that evolved within this field, how we function and what we can learn from each other. More specifically, what we can learn from the collectivising tools we've been using.** This is as relevant for the internal networks of artists, members, users, volunteers, etc., as for the external networks of neighbours, partners, and so on. Examples of such tools you can find in Co.Labs research report '[On location-specific participation tools](#)'.

With the information that comes out of this survey and on the basis of your feedback, we will map artist-run spaces in Belgium, and create an overview of the tools and methodologies they use to empower the involved people and networks. Such spaces by and for collectivization, include: artist studio collectives (with or without living quarters), as well as artist-run galleries, production venues, offspaces, but also artist studio providers and other creative spaces...

B. POSITIONING

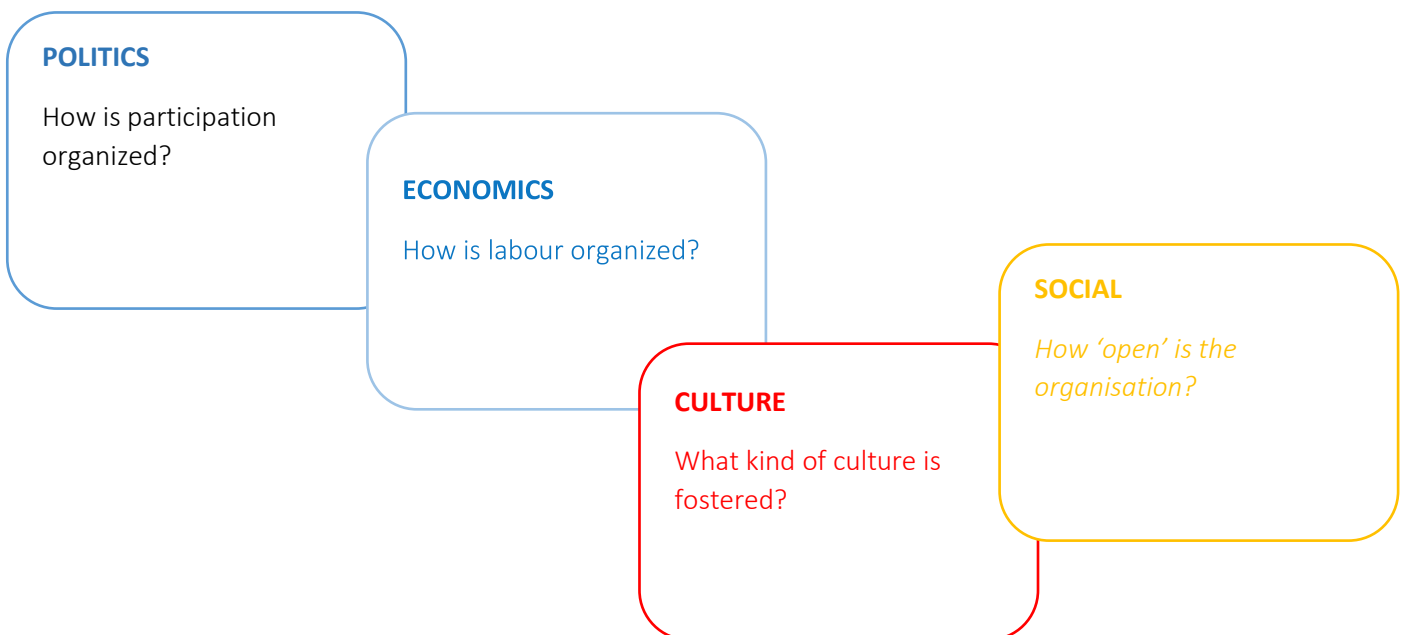
Once done, this mapping will help to provide better circumstances to develop, support and manage such spaces. First of all by making it accessible through the Fair Arts Almanac (and possibly other publications), but also by helping to create policy for it, which until today, because of the many different models, isn't really made – and then we are not even mentioning the complexities to deal with when making policy for shared infrastructure for *mixed* use...

Inspirational and clarifying policy papers:

- [‘On location-specific participation tools’](#)
- Demos [‘Ruimte Maken’](#)- on participation spaces for specific groups:
- Socius on empowering civil networks; [1](#) & [2](#)
- Vitamine C (today [Publiq](#)) also conducted a trajectory on creative spaces (documentation needed)
- Kunstenpunt [‘Ruimte Maken & Nieuwstedelijke Grond’](#)
- Demos [‘Manifest on Participatory Artist Practices’](#)
- [A recent research](#) by Oikos and the Koning Boudewijn Stichting on the evolution of bottom-up civilian initiatives in Belgium
- [‘Commons Transition Plan for Ghent’](#) by peer-to-peer expert Michel Bauwens

C. ABOUT OUR STRATEGY

When doing interviews with cultural participation spaces, we noticed how many of them are active within what might be the four main domains of our society; politics, economics, culture and the social domain. This way artist-run or participatory spaces are sometimes becoming mini-societies within society. By tackling these four domains, we aim for a holistic approach.



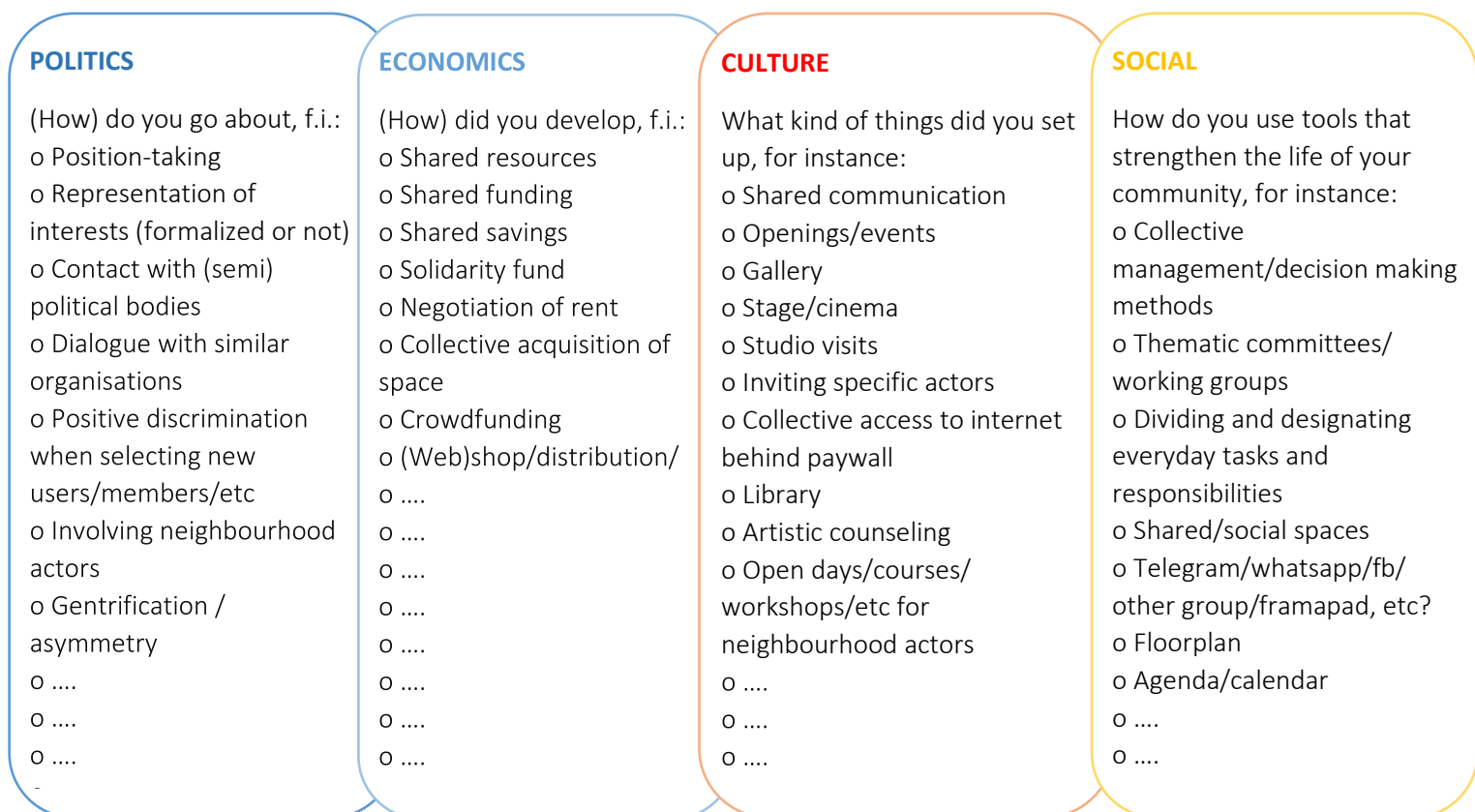
D. MAPPING TOOLS FOR EMPOWERMENT

The main aim of this 'survey-mapping-tool' is to get an overview of the (most successful) methodologies for empowering and sustainable collectivation and participation - to share them and to learn from them. Afterwards, we will process these in the SOTA Fair Arts Almanac, and perhaps in other publications.

We realize that the answers on our last and most important question of the survey "Give some examples of how do you empower your internal and external network", will be very diverse. That is why we aim to categorise them twofold.

A. Categorizing per domain

Here we divide all tools according to our fair main domains; politics, economics, culture and social.



B. Categorization per type

This categorization is based on a research done in Amsterdam on collectivization tools within *Broedplaatsen* (creative artist studio spaces) and coworking spaces: ['On location-specific participation tools'](#)

- Internal communication (e.g. shared folders with floorplans, planning and strategies)
- Community mediation (e.g. network events, event support or the visibility of the users)
- Co-working tools (e.g. shared, connecting spaces)
- Participation tools (e.g. software for collective decision making or open boards)

- Start-up phase: selection and spatial clustering of members (e.g. thematic vs compatibility, groups vs individuals)
- Events and member participation (e.g. neighborhood event, interactive tour guides, exhibition)

E. SOME CASES OF EMPOWERING TOOLS FOR COLLECTIVATION

A. Toestand – *Missions to reactivate spaces voluntarily*

Toestand is a Belgian social-profit organization. It's hard to tell if it is localized in the cultural, the youth, the social sector, or somewhere else. Toestand is creative in mixing different kinds of groups in one space, thinking as well about the neighborhood and about redistribution. Here, we pinpoint one specific activity of Toestand, **Toestand Internationaal**, their yearly renovation trip with volunteers.

Every year Toestand finds a project that needs support with construction work. They raise money and get funding, often about 50.000€ from EU, to pay for transport, construction material, food and some other small costs. Together with a local organization, they turn unused spaces into (social-cultural/public) creative spaces. Every year they involve about fifty volunteers, to join them on a trip where the main activities exist of construction work and re-inventing spaces – where food and the transport is paid for.

Why this example? More and more you see how people 'voluntarily' want to make (public) spaces. Instead of creating a new world outside of the capitalist system, they work from within it, and look first at what they can do themselves while connecting to existing actors. Creative spaces can function in our current neoliberalist economy and at the same time propose economic alternatives.

So how does Toestand empower the people involved?

- **Internal network of volunteers; networking, sharing skills, experience, an adventurous holiday with free transport, stay and food.**
- **External network; a deprived neighborhood gets a boost by a new social cultural center and because of the new organization that came alive while doing so.**

See also: <https://www.canvas.be/video/cc-prishtina> (in Dutch)

B. PAF (Performing Arts Forum) – *Self-sustainable economic ecologies*

PAF is an old girls school building that looks a bit like a monastery, **bought by 50 creatives – mostly artists and philosophers – who all have their share of 20.000€**. It's a residency space for people who need to strongly focus on their work, with performance spaces, libraries, a media space, a yoga studio, music rooms, a garden and a sauna. It is beautiful to see how this place has come to **self-organization** with only **four rules: 'Don't leave traces', 'The doer decides', 'Make it possible for others' and 'Mind asymmetry'**. For example, who registers for a dance or music week and enters the building, soon realizes they have to find out a way to organize it themselves. Soon they start sharing practices and so come to **a self-made program**.

There is much to say about every creative space. Here, we would like to focus on the economic empowerment of PAF. People who bought a share can use a room for free, for about 60 days a year and can vote on every next move the organization makes. It is not about profit. Once you step

out of it, your share gets sold to a person on the waiting list, and you will probably receive about the same amount as you have ‘invested’ in it.

For all others, PAF is open (without any top-down selection process like in many artist residencies) for a price that is lower than the average hostel. Only one person, the concierge-gardener, is employed. The other work (cooking, cleaning, managing) is collective.

So how do they empower the people involved?

- **Internal network; a self-sufficient and clearly empowering financial cooperative model**
- **External network; PAF is an example of self-organization and how to construct our lives differently through sharing, networking, learning from the model, cheap residencies in a lovely, well-equipped and interesting building, accessible for less privileged people.**

C. [L’Asilo](#) commons spaces, Naples – *Distribution of power*

Around the year 2000, many squatted spaces in Europe were turned into creative spaces, or as we say, were instrumentalized by and for the purpose of local authorities. Yet, since 2009 in Italy, cultural initiatives started occupying (cultural) spaces. In 2012 in Naples, the old historical building ‘L’Asilo’ was squatted. The squatters started to communicate with the local authorities, knowing that on the one hand, Italy has difficulties with funding the maintenance of their historical buildings. On the other hand, a new law came through which made it possible to manage goods as commons in Italy. Because of the many people involved who were familiar with the legal system, they amended in 2015, together with the local administration, the city policy to legalize commons buildings: [The Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use](#).

The process that creates these private benefits that are limited based on collective decisions, is of value. It is not only about material outcome. The immaterial and relational aspects are at least equally important.

How do they do it in Naples? (1) Everybody is responsible. Who is responsible when a house is from everyone? The choice to have this kind of organizational structure, is made to avoid power clusters. (2) A voting system. Everyone who wants to use the space can come to the weekly assembly to present and defend their proposition. There and then, everyone can vote. Only the propositions agreed upon by consensus get through. (3) The decisions are written down, and formalized in a document of the local authorities.

“Creative spaces should always be careful for too much interference of local authorities. At the same time, why not embrace this cooperation and get on top of it? The same goes for commercial instances. Would it not be possible to work together with or from within in our current system, fostering collaborations with other domains and building bridges to people who might speak other languages? It might help to make commoning spaces a bit more self-sustainable economically and it would make it possible to compensate certain labor with fair payments, instead of asking the city to do it.” – D.V.d.V.

This process started with one space in Naples, now there are seven.

So how does L’Asilo empower the people involved?

- **Internal network; Networking, sharing skills, free space to use**
- **External network; offering free space to use (for neighbors), offering an innovative way of working with potentially far-reaching consequences, new ways of protecting cultural patrimony.**

D. [Jubilee](#) – platform for artistic research and production

After the more introductory descriptions of Toestand International, PAF and L'Asilo, here's an example of how the main question of the survey could be answered.

Economics: Jubilee's vzw (not-for-profit association) is the legal body through which its member artists started to apply for funding. This gave the association a leverage that helped qualifying for structural funding. This allows for staff, offices, professional bookkeeping, and the artists regularly being paid for specific tasks. Jubilee started a Jubilee commons fund by allotting 1% of the managed project budgets.

Cultural: Peer to peer reviewing of funding applications. Organizing collective research projects where also non-member artists, art workers and researchers are involved. These projects often deal with the socio-economic conditions of artistic practice, all while mutualizing resources, risks and interest.

Politics: Jubilee is part of dialogues between similar organisations in groups such as SOTA, oKo, PAM, Midsize strategy meeting, Permanent, Brussels artist-run network, EFAP...through one of the artists or the coordinator who represent Jubilee there. This allows Jubilee to be part of the discourses that have an impact, and be informed, without all artists needing to be present. Political position-taking, leading, for instance, to one of our artists being part of the workgroup on the Artist Status by the Federal State/Department of Social Security). Representation (not formalized) of interests of many visual artists. Also in less direct ways, for example by dedicating a section on our website to 'austerity and solidarity'.

So how does Jubilee empower the people involved?

- **Internal network: commoning resources through a legal body allowed the group to become much more than the sum of its member artists.**
- **External network: the group of artists became a platform that makes it easier for the members to also work for others.**

F. OVERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY – first version, June 2021

DISCLAIMER. This survey is still a first draft and might change after our workshop on - and based on the feedback we gather before - the 3th of July.

The last questions are about giving your consent to the use of the data you provide for further research and publication. This is to ensure the security of information and privacy.

You can answer in French, Dutch or English.

V0. Please fill in your name.

V0.1.

What is the name of your space/organisation/collective.

V0.2.

Where is the organisation based + radius of activity

V0.3.

How can we contact you?

V1. Level of Participation

What ways of participating do you identify with most?

- No user participation or collective decision making
- Participatory methodologies, transparency, centralized organization/governance/coordination (Participation)
- Horizontal structure, Equal share/voice, Not one author/owner (Co-creation)
- As few meetings as possible, beyond voting, the doer decides, culture of complete trust, avoiding centralization (Self-organization)

V1.1.

What terms for participants do you identify with?

- Audience & visitors
- Neighbors
- Volunteers
- Stakeholders
- Tenants / renters
- Precarious users
- Partners
- Active members
- Doers
- Customers
- Others

V2. Structure of decision making

How do you organise participation within decision making? (e.g. working groups, assembly, council, voting system, advisory board, etc.)

V3.

Structure of decision making

Is there a voting mechanism?

V4.

Org.-structure

Are some of your members/users/partners from other sectors than the culture sector?

- Yes
- No
- If yes, which sectors?

V5.

Org.-structure

Do you have a board of administrators?

- Yes
- No
- Other / What role do they have in decision making?

V6.

Org.-structure

Number of people involved in decision making (staff, board, members...)?

VA. Remarks?

V7. Type of Legal Body

- o Non-profit
- o For profit
- o Social profit: coop
- o no legal body

V8.

Why did you choose for this type or combination of types of legal body/bodies?

Q40.

Funding

Approx. annual budget

V9.

Funding

Where do you get your funding; to buy/rent/... the space? + to work?

V9b.

Funding

If no funding, how do you work?

V10.

Number of FTE? + Number of people employed?

V11.

Volunteers? Paid? How many hours/week?

VB. Remarks?

V12.

Type of activities

Main mission?

Please be brief

V13.

Type of activities

What type of spaces do you provide?

V14.

Type of activities

Discipline(s)* & functions (according to Flemish Community field, or other)**?

*

a) Visual arts, literature, theatre, film, performance, music...

b) Sport, youth, elder people, specific groups, economic activities, co-working spaces, housing, social organisations...

** *Providing spaces or organising activities for development, presentation, production, participation or reflection*

See also: https://wp.assets.sh/uploads/sites/4718/2020/03/2019Definitie_Functies.pdf

V15.

Years of existence?

VC.

Remarks?

V16.

Type of governance

How is the space governed?

- Private – Governed by one organization
- Shared* – Governed by different organizations
- Commons** – Everyone is free to join the governance of the space
- Public – There is no governance of the space, it's a public/common responsibility

V17.

If mixed, please estimate proportions give the percentage per space.

- Private
- Shared
- Public
- Commons
- Total

V16.2. Spatial accessibility

How open is your space?

- Always open – Garden, park, playground...
- Open during specific hours – Gallery, shop, library, cinema, bar, resto...
- Open for 'members/renters' and their 'friends' – Artist studio space, meeting space, lunch area...
- Closed for visitors – Private space, desk space...

V18.

Please elaborate; is the space open – for who – when?

V19. Total number of people actively involved on a structural basis (can be approximative)

V20.

What relations do you keep with (local) authorities?

(E.g. a dialogue about local facilities, mapping local actors, logistics, permissions, can they provide budget, a site manager, infrastructural support, help with funding, etc.?)

V21.

Position regarding fair practices? Code of conduct? oKo charter Juist is Juist?

- Fair Practices Charter
- Code of Conduct
- We haven't thought about it yet

VD.

Remarks?

V22.

How does your space/organisation empower its users, audiences and others? The more original/unexpected details, the better!

What tools do you use to empower your 'internal network'* & 'external network'**?

* Everybody using or working for 'The Space'

** Here, we specifically want to focus on anti-gentrification with neighbourhood trajectories. External network = network of neighbourhood actors such as neighbours and neighbourhood organisations.

What do we need? To understand better how your methodology empowers the people involved, please embed responses to the following questions where you think this is relevant.

- How and why did you implemented this way of working? Does it relate to a problem?
- Is it structurally embedded within your organisation?
- How does it empower the people involved?
- Are there any side-effects?
- Try to get beyond words and methodologies such as networking and sharing

For inspiration: please have a look at our instruction manual.

VE. Remarks & thoughts

Q51. Can we use your responses for further research?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Q52. Can we use your responses for a publication?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Q55. 4 final, non-compulsory questions that could give a more lighthearted but very relevant turn to our research

- What would your ideal space look like?
- Why is collectivization important for you?

- How would you create better circumstances for empowering, participation and collectivising?
- Anything else that you would like to share?

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.
Your response has been recorded.

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