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## In search for good practices to safeguard (intangible) heritage of the performing arts

A Flemish case study

dr. Staf VOS



## Overview

1. Legislative context
2. Het Firmament: self-positioning (2012-2016)
  - general
  - tangible heritage
  - intangible heritage
3. *[case]* Het Firmament: self-positioning (1968-2012)
4. *[case]* Towards a Living Human Treasures policy in Flanders?



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**HET FIRMAMENT**  
PODIUMKUNSTENERFGOED

Centre of expertise for the heritage of the performing arts

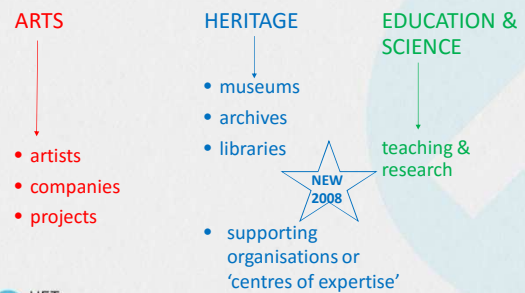
Mechelen, Flanders, BELGIUM



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## 1. Legislative context

Flemish government – distinct funding departments:



## 2008

New Cultural Heritage Decree in Flanders

- Not only care for cultural heritage in ('expert') **institutions**
- also focus on the **support** of heritage processes in ('expert') **communities**, organisations and individuals outside the professional heritage field



## shift

**from** collection managers  
**to** development of services and coordination of processes

**from** top-down care  
**to** answering bottom-up needs of a 'heritage community'

**from** 'curation'  
**to** 'participation'



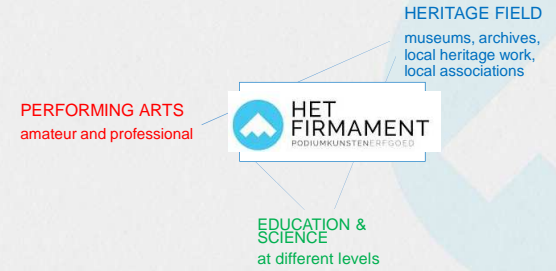

**influence of**

**2003 UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage**

**2006-2010 Initiatives by Flemish government to implement**



**2. Het Firmament: mission & self-positioning today**

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*'neutral'*


**'NETWORKER'**

**'BRIDGE'**

**'FACILITATOR'**

**'BROKER'**

€180.000/year - 3,6 FTE)



**How?**

**We develop expertise & services on aspects of tangible heritage**

- Tracing and mapping collections & archives (c&a) on [www.hetfirmament.be](http://www.hetfirmament.be)
- Sustainable care for performing arts c&a
- Appraisal, selection, deaccession of c&a
- Finding depots for important c&a
- 'Re-activating' performing arts heritage in publicly oriented initiatives
- Communication of good practices



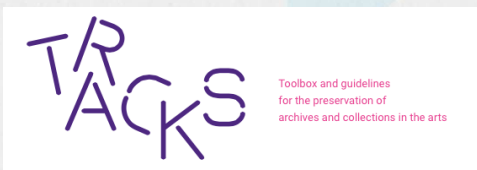

**Supporting sustainable care for performing arts c&a?**

Instead of doing it ourselves, ...




**Supporting sustainable care for performing arts c&a?**

[1] we developed...



[2] we coordinate **mass digitization** of audiovisual archives of the performing arts

→ to guarantee long-term conservation

[2] ...

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**How?**

**We develop expertise & services on aspects of intangible heritage**

- Tracing & mapping intangible techniques, approaches and processes
- Help with documenting of performing arts
- Transmission of intangible cultural heritage
- 'Re-activating' performing arts heritage in publicly oriented initiatives

*Initiative, approach, responsibility, viability*  
→ starts & ends with communities themselves!

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**UNESCO: Intangible heritage**

**"practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. [...] transmitted from generation to generation [...] constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment [...] and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity."**

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**UNESCO: Safeguarding**

**"measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage."**

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Challenges re intangible heritage elements in living performing arts:

- clustered or specific?
- community traditions or individual inventions?
- 'high' – 'folk' – 'popular' culture
- Western – non-Western
- canonical repertoire vs. Taylor's repertoire'

("embodied memory-performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing - all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge")




**We offer support in a variety of forms, for free**

- Training courses
- Customized guidance, on-site visits, brainstorm
- Conferences and public events
- Sharing experience, information and 'inspiring practices' through communication, etc.



2. Het Firmament's (pre)history: shifts in self-positioning between 1968-2012




1968-2009: School & Centre for **puppetry arts**

↓


2009-2011: Centre of expertise for the cultural **heritage of puppetry**

↓

2012- : Centre of expertise for the cultural **heritage of the performing arts**



2. Het Firmament's (pre)history: shifts in self-positioning between 1968-2012



1968-2009: School & Centre for **puppetry arts**


↓

! **ingression of the heritage paradigm !**

2009-2011: Centre of expertise for the cultural **heritage of puppetry**

↓

2012- : Centre of expertise for the cultural **heritage of the performing arts**



Why the heritage paradigm?

NEEDS FOR SUPPORT AND FUNDING:

- lack of resources for school & centre
- no place for puppetry in Flemish Theatre Institute or official arts education




Why the heritage paradigm?

OPPORTUNITIES:

- 2003: UNESCO Convention for s. of intangible heritage → puppetry as a testing ground for policy on intangible cultural heritage
- 2004: 1<sup>st</sup>e Flemish Cultural Heritage Decree → funding for research project towards a strategy to transmit heritage of puppetry in the long term:

*A study into the need, the feasibility and the desirability of a Home for puppet theatre in Flanders*



## IMPLICATIONS: ...

'heritagization'

different ways to instrumentalize concept of 'heritage' <-> art & art field (conservative, promotional, 'ecological'; repertory vs. repertoire)

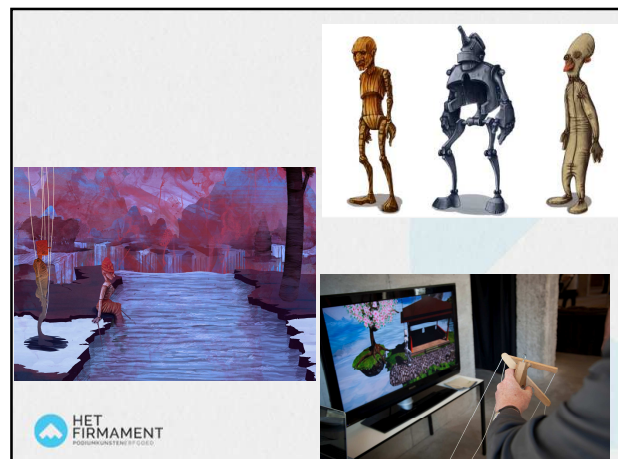
cf. other concepts: 'contemporary', ...

→ for puppetry: fruitful



## Research project (2005-2009)

- **Mapping of the field and its heritage**
- **Need for instyitution:** a house for puppetry is desirable and feasible, if only it can be a *hybrid* organization
- **Need for performative and playful engagement** with heritage: working with both tangible and intangible heritage (new creations / 'aura' or not / computer game)



## Research project (2005-2009)

### Methodological:

- official recognition helps to convince community
  - external employees
  - common goals & collaborative methods
- interviews and annual conference; thesaurus group; focus groups; sensibilise external stakeholders



## Research project (2005-2009)

### Yet...

Home for Puppetry received no funding...

### Problems:

- Niches = difficult issue
- New institutions = difficult issue
- Bottom-up need or top down search for legitimacy?
- Empowering a community or strengthening an organisation?
- Centralizing vs. decentralization of heritage responsibility
  - other ways of making communities & individuals responsible for safeguarding?



## 2. Towards a Living Human Treasures programme for performing arts in Flanders



## 2. Research project: towards a Living Human Treasures programme for performing arts in Flanders?

- International examples
- "What's the problem?": diversity of needs in performing arts & education
- Interviews & focus groups
- Importance of transmission (takes time, need for master-student model)
- Importance of sensibilisation (promotion, gaining support with external parties)



## 2. Research project: towards a Living Human Treasures programme for performing arts in Flanders?

- Importance of recognition and protection of a 'craft'
- Need for support in business aspects and administration
- 'Heritagization': benefits and risks?
- Responsabilisation of individuals in relation to communities, less depending on institutions
- Support of institutions & academia remains possible: research, documenting, outside eye...



## QUESTIONS

What are your experiences with thoughts about the '(intangible) heritage paradigm' with regard to living art ?

How can we use UNESCO's intangible heritage approach at their benefit while avoiding the risks?



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