



CREATIVE
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STRONGER ARTS
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ORGANISATIONS
FOR A GREATER
SOCIAL IMPACT

CREATIVE LENSES
Catalyst programme
Case study
ODC ENSEMBLE

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ODC ENSEMBLE

Published in Sweden in 2019 Copyright @ Trans Europe Halles, 2019

ISBN 978-91-985176-3-7

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Design: Therese Severinsen
Photo Credits: Alex Kat and Elias Moraitis

Creative Lenses is a four-year project, running from 2015 to 2019, that seeks to make arts and cultural organisations more resilient and sustainable by improving their business models and developing their long-term strategic and innovation capacities.

To find out more about Creative Lenses and its publications, visit www.creativelenses.eu



Creative Lenses is a project co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union.

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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Introduction

This case study explores changes made by ODC Ensemble, a performing arts company based in Athens, Greece, as a result of thinking about its business model and the challenges encountered as part of the process. Business model is a contested term, but the following definition captures the essence of the idea:

A business model describes an organisation's activities and assets and the ways that they are combined to create value for the organisation itself, for individuals and for society.

This definition highlights that business models are not all about money-making. Business models are to do with how organisations combine resources to create and capture financial and other forms of value within different institutional logics. Creating a successful business model requires finding people, funders and partners that value what an organisation does and are willing to enter into financial or other exchanges to access it: directly, as a user or customer, or indirectly, as a funder, partner or donor.

There are several possible ways of describing business models. This case study uses a combination of dominant approaches in order to detail the important parts of the organisation as well as the relationships and behaviours that have enabled it to succeed over time. To situate the business model within its context, the case study highlights the mix of political, economic, social and technological factors informing existing business models whilst also indicating instances where contextual factors call for adjustments to the existing model or a shift between one model and another. Throughout the case study, the role of institutional logics, organisational cultures and personal motivations in shaping business model design and choices of how to change or modify business models comes into the frame.

This case study is one of eight written as part of Creative Lenses (2015-2019), funded by Creative Europe. As part of the project, the partners designed and implemented a series of eight 'Catalyst' projects in 2017-2018, during which an arts and cultural organisation was provided with resources to make changes. The project did not prescribe any particular type of change, leaving organisations to identify their own priorities and objectives. For ODC Ensemble the resources provided were: financial support (€20,000 plus €3,500 for audience development), mentoring support from Creative Lenses partners and a series of workshops attended by all the organisations and mentors.

As a kind of action learning, the research applied an analytical lens to the practices and experiences of the organisations participating in the Creative Lenses Catalyst Programme. The purpose of the research was to understand what approaches were taken to business model change and why, and to question how organisational cultures and institutional logics have shaped and been shaped by the process. The research explores the relationship between the frameworks of values underpinning cultural work, the organisation's particular mission and the need to produce sufficient income. Data were gathered through interviews, site visits, participation in workshops and document analysis. The case study was written by academic researchers and was reviewed by members of the organisation and its mentors.



Athens is
a hot city

Responding to the Local, Becoming International

ODC Ensemble is a small not-for-profit performing arts company based in Athens, Greece. The case study explores a challenge that is often encountered by organisations of this type: how to maintain a sense of artistic integrity and organisational purpose when the driver for business model change comes from external forces. Against a backdrop of economic crisis in Greece, ODC Ensemble adapted by experimenting with different forms of income-generation and by seeking to present its work to international audiences at festivals. In so doing, ODC Ensemble has embraced these changes and shifted towards being international and mobile, connecting and collaborating with international players.

The key learning points from this case are:

- A willingness and capacity to adapt to change is at the centre of ODC Ensemble's organisational sustainability, with the capacity to change being provided by participation in European projects
- ODC Ensemble's phases of development represent different business models, with each phase requiring different skills and fundamentally changing the scope and remit of the organisation
- Financial sustainability is an ongoing issue, with a preference for maintaining the autonomy and political content of performances meaning that the company seek relationships with stakeholders with access to the necessary economic capital to pay for productions
- Business model change primarily involves developing new relationships with funders and other organisations rather than audiences
- Narrating change in a positive language is important to organisational morale and the company's brand image

Organisational Overview

ODC Ensemble is a not-for-profit performing arts company based in Athens, Greece.¹ First set up in 2002 as an arts collective, since then the organisation has changed and involved various people over time. Elli Papakonstantinou has remained constant throughout, both as artistic director and as stage director of all ODC's productions. Over this period, the number of people involved has changed, reaching three full-time and four part-time staff employed by the organisation in 2018. Several other cultural practitioners also work with the company on an ad hoc basis. The story of how ODC Ensemble has sustained itself is tied up with developments in Greece, where

¹ In this text, the term company is used in the theatrical sense, as a group of people who perform together, rather than to suggest ODC Ensemble are a business with the aim of gaining a profit for distribution to private individuals.

the financial and economic crisis from 2007-8 onwards led to dramatic changes in national and local funding and demand for the arts.

ODC Ensemble describes its purpose as 'to foster an environment for artists active in the field of contemporary and experimental art to imagine and grow freely, create quality theatre and inspire the community. To engage, inspire, entertain and challenge audiences with theatrical productions that range from the classics to new works, combining dance, new media, visual arts and music'.² Its mission is expansive, and combines aspirational content with statements of strategic intent: 'international networking, creating new structures, festivals and platforms to promote contemporary art, artistic residences and creative hubs in Greece' is cited alongside a commitment to 'a world in regards to hybrid performance and site-specific theatre where citizens from marginalised groups; in particular people of colour, class backgrounds, and abilities can be who they are, are accepted as equals, have access to performance-based education, and see themselves represented in performance on stage'.³ Alongside this articulation of its mission, ODC Ensemble says it aims to 'create performance works that are emotive and physically demanding by challenging ourselves beyond our artistic limits'.⁴

Against a backdrop of ongoing change to cultural policy and funding levels, ODC Ensemble has sustained itself by substantially adapting its scope and remit. A sense of an unchanged core purpose means these changes are not experienced negatively. While its audience has expanded from the national to the international scale, the political ambition of the productions remains unaltered. This is important to practitioners' sense of professional identity and artistic autonomy. This case illustrates a diversity of approaches taken by practitioners to maintaining a firm sense of professional identity and purpose whilst the organisational environment they work in adapts to fit the priorities of external stakeholders. What is also clear is how much ongoing professional work is required to align ODC Ensemble's external image in texts such as mission statements to the objectives and priorities of funding bodies, raising questions about the skills and malleability required to survive in a challenging financial environment such as Greece.

Organisational Background

The trajectory of ODC Ensemble cannot be understood as a story of organisational development alone. Rather, the development of ODC Ensemble reflects the professional journey of its artistic director who is the linchpin of the organisation. Staff feel strongly that 'Without Elli there

would be no ODC', 'Elli is ODC' and 'She is the puppeteer, she is holding the strings'.^{5,6,7} The relationship between the artistic director and the operational employees of the organisation can be understood as a leader/follower dynamic. Whilst individuals exercised their own agency to make decisions at points and were clearly respected for their contribution to the company, staff deferred to the artistic director for the majority of key decisions. They saw their role as facilitating a space for her and the other performers to explore their artistic vision and develop performances. Separation between the operational and artistic domains of the organisation was seen as crucial to the success of the organisation, providing a necessary layer of protection between the artistic work of the company and the everyday concerns of management and finance.

Trajectory of ODC Ensemble

Phase 1 (2002-2010): dispersed group of theatre practitioners

Phase 2 (2010-2016): concentrated group of theatre practitioners operating a venue in Athens

Phase 3 (2016-): concentrated group of theatre practitioners working across venues and scales

The story of ODC Ensemble can be split into distinct phases. A combination of internal and external, international, national and local factors provided the impetus for change. Established in 2002, the early stages of ODC Ensemble were a relatively low-key period mainly involving artist Elli Papakonstantinou. At this time, the artistic director was living and working between Athens and Berlin, directing one show with the company at this time, whilst also working as a freelance stage director. The austerity measures implemented after the financial crisis of 2007-8 and the national debt crisis in Greece are central to understanding the next phase in ODC Ensemble's development. The changes made in response to the financial implications of austerity is an example of business model change that allowed the ensemble to survive by changing the direction of their work.

Current Business Model

The funding possibilities for independent cultural organisations such as ODC Ensemble are limited, and have been since the company came into being. The austerity measures devised after the financial crisis of 2007-8 and the national debt crisis in Greece are a key influence. The present circumstances of the Greek government limits extensive investment in the arts. However, the type of organisations who tend to receive public money

² Unpublished project document, January 2018.

³ Unpublished project document, January 2018.

⁴ Unpublished project document, January 2018.

⁵ Interview, Athens, February 2018.

⁶ Interview, Athens, February 2018.

⁷ Interview, Athens, February 2018.



is also a relevant point. Like elsewhere, the majority of this flows to national organisations such as the Athens Philharmonic and the Greek National Opera. Additionally, the sheer volume of archaeological sites in Athens and the vast expense of continual preservation is also a significant factor in limiting the amount of money available to the government for investment in small-scale or experimental performing arts organisations such as ODC Ensemble. After many years without public subsidy within Greece, the company received a grant of €15,000 from the Ministry of Culture in 2017 to support a performance, out of total revenues of €128,000 that year. Yet there is no guarantee of continual support from these channels, and the ongoing financial uncertainty within Greece continues to impact on the organisation.

In response to this, the main reason ODC Ensemble has pursued changes to its business model over time was to improve the sustainability of the organisation. For some members of the organisation, sustainability was understood purely in a financial sense. A desire to become self-sustaining was linked to a feeling that public subsidy couldn't be relied upon, in particular given economic and political developments in Greece. Notably, the decline in subsidy available from the Greek government was viewed as a permanent constraint. However the creation of a new job role in the

organisation, with a specific focus on obtaining and managing EU project funds suggests confidence in the continuing availability of this source of finance for the company.

Achieving financial sustainability was felt to be a challenge at both practical and artistic levels. Members of the company spoke of discussions within the team about the potential of staging a production that would be more commercial. For the company, being 'commercial' had to do with popularity, with particular kinds of theatrical content, and the use of well-known performers:

*'I mean it's not an easy play, it's just for fun, this is for me commercial, with big names, well-known actors and something that would be attractive to any audience. I mean to have a simple story, a love story, a comedy or something like that.'*⁸

However, becoming more commercial is about engaging with a broader and different audiences too. One member of staff pointed to the implications in terms of the audiences already familiar with ODC Ensemble: 'An ancient tragedy or to do Shakespeare or to do something everybody knows and they will come and watch it but then ODC has a specific crowd of people and immediately when you do something commercial the audience will get lost. Commercial is mainstream in what we say and what we present, everybody can understand it, we don't have deep philosophical meanings'.⁹ Another aspect of being commercial was the potential for a performance to generate significant revenues because they could be staged over a period of months instead of days. Overall, being 'commercial' was seen not just about making (more) money, but in fact changing the way the organisation would operate. Being commercial would result in different productions, for different audiences, with whom the organisation would have a different relationship. In short, it would require a different business model, where scale is emphasized over content. Therefore, achieving financial sustainability may not be about retaining the status quo. ODC's mission statements and members of the team speak of a political approach, yet ODC Ensemble's model and its audience has changed significantly in response to circumstances beyond their control.

Organisational Culture and Values

Strict divisions between 'commercial' and 'quality' art do not make sense to members of ODC Ensemble. Staff spoke of enjoying when 'things cross

⁸ Interview, Athens, February 2018.

⁹ Interview, Athens, February 2018.

over'.¹⁰ The artistic director's perspective on the potential to make changes to the business model recognised the need to have diverse sources of income. This realisation resulted from acceptance of the economic circumstances in Greece and perhaps an understanding that the value of commercial performances was not inherently less than non-commercial shows.

However, in its operations ODC Ensemble chose to seek sources of income that did not require them to alter the content of their productions. It is here that we see the issue of priorities emerging. The criteria used to judge their activities was largely aesthetic, not economic or social. When making decisions about where to seek income, the priority was about creating the theatrical content the company wanted to make, irrespective of whether performances would be seen by local or international audiences.

In addition to keeping their artistic practice autonomous, interpreted by the organisation as avoiding having to change the content of productions, being a sustainable organisation meant 'providing a healthy environment for the artists to express themselves'.¹¹ The emphasis here was on the creative staff. It is the performers and artistic collaborators who stand to benefit from the internationalisation of ODC Ensemble. In contrast, the people working behind the scenes do not have the same opportunities for travel as those whose work is essential for the performance.

The case of ODC Ensemble is a potent example of how the changing economic context for culture in Greece shapes the ambitions of cultural organisations. It is also an illustration of how the priority attached to notions of independence and self-determined content mean questions of who consumes, who produces and under what conditions those who support cultural production work is downplayed and in some cases, their importance denied.

Managing Business Model Change

A combination of financial imperatives and political motivations lead ODC Ensemble to change elements of its business model. Following the debt crisis, the artistic director returned to Greece, a decision framed as a direct reaction to the political situation:

'Thanks to the Greek crisis and the situation here first of all I came back to Greece but I was in Berlin at the time, and I decided to react, not just by making theatre or art but really trying to connect with what was happening around me and in my society'.¹²

The team's language of 'crisis' and 'catastrophe' (instead of 'austerity') reflects the severity of the limitations placed on public spending as part of the Greek government's debt restructuring arrangement with European financial institutions. To give a sense of the circumstances at the time, the public broadcaster was taken off the air for a short period. Public grants that had been approved were never received. But this terminology also enabled members of the company to emphasise the positive effects of the catastrophe '[which] in Greek means turnaround, it doesn't have a negative connotation necessarily so we had to rethink everything'.¹³

For the artistic director, and as a result for ODC Ensemble, the Greek crisis acted as a catalyst for change. As a reaction to the 'bourgeois pieces' dominating the artistic scene in Athens, the artistic director spoke of 'devising performances' as 'there was no text that would talk about what it was that we were experiencing... the aesthetics became rougher'.¹⁴ Collaboration, both between organisations and as an approach to dramaturgy, became more important. The crisis was interpreted as resulting in a break in routine practice, and a language of 'solidarity' and 'positive resistance in times of national crisis, collective values and strong political vision'¹⁵ began to shape the organisation. The emphasis on the positive is motivating and seeks to underline the freedom of the organisation to set its own agenda in spite of significant political change. However, this positive spin potentially occludes discussion of winners and losers or the desirability of 'rethinking everything' for different members of the organisation and its audiences.

In the period immediately following the crisis, ODC Ensemble felt it was important to have a physical space in Athens as a public space for dialogue and discussion. It was felt that the crisis was a call to action, not only for artists but for a broader public who were looking for a space to 'serve as a meeting point for the whole of the community not just artists, people who were around, to reflect on how society was changing and to be an active part of that'.¹⁶ Established in 2011, Vyrsopeiseio, a former 19th century tannery, provided a multifunctional space for ODC Ensemble to house productions and other events. It is from this point that it becomes useful to talk about the switch between phase two and three of its development as an example of business model change.

¹⁰ Interview, February 2018.

¹¹ Helsinki workshop, 2017.

¹² Interview, Athens, February 2018.

¹³ Interview, Athens, February 2018.

¹⁴ Interview, Athens, February 2018.

¹⁵ Interview, Athens, February 2018.

¹⁶ Interview, Athens, February 2018.

Vyrsodepseio was a large multifunctional space where ODC Ensemble performed site-specific theatre, devised by the company, alongside a broader cultural programme of film, theatre, music and video art. The space was rented from a private landlord and was approximately 30 minutes from the city centre by public transport. This building was the mainstay of ODC Ensemble's business model and operations from 2011-16. Hiring the space for events provided the majority of the company's income. But sometimes even this was insufficient; one member of staff noted that holiday homes members of the company owned in the Greek islands provided a 'parallel income source that ran as a parallel business to feed into Vyrsodepseio's income'.¹⁷ Despite this entrepreneurial shift to running a cultural hub, as well as creating performances, ODC Ensemble still struggled in the absence of public funding or support for the arts:

'Should the Greek government have any sort of funding to give out to support the arts, Vyrsodepseio would have been saved and would have thrived. Should recession measures loosen up, Vyrsodepseio's human resources would persist but as crisis deepened, volunteers, supporters and cultural operators after five years of no funding struggled to survive in general in a suffocating environment'.¹⁸

After some years of running the venue, the company began to realise this change of business model had led to drift from the organisation's artistic vision:

'On a professional level, I gradually came face-to-face with the cruel reality that Vyrsodepseio's main income source were the rentals and the parties and not the art and culture. The venture was rapidly turning into an ugly business for me, which had nothing to do with my artistic and political values and vision. Indeed, the equation didn't make much sense anymore: if I should run a summer business (which is hard work) in order to sustain a rental/party business in order to sustain innovative art why not bypass the second part of that equation?'¹⁹

The importance of EU funding to ODC Ensemble is clear, as is the way involvement in various EU projects have shaped the direction of the organisation. For several years there was no national source of funding for ODC Ensemble and no other funding sources 'to employ people' other than the EU.²⁰ In the past decade, ODC Ensemble participated in two Creative Europe cooperation projects (Creative Lenses and Europe Grand Central), an Erasmus + project and the European Voluntary Service (EVS). Involvement in

these is a vital source of income for the organisation. However, the funding cannot be spent on overheads associated with operating a physical space.

Funding availability has influenced the business model of ODC Ensemble in multiple ways. In 2017, over half of the company's income came from European Union programmes. The importance of this income stream (and the time-commitment participation in projects requires) is illustrated by the organisation employing a part-time member of staff in the role of finance manager for EU programmes. However, the company has also concentrated its efforts on international festivals. The producers of cultural products need to find a customer who is willing to enter into a financial exchange to access that product. For ODC Ensemble, it is international festival organisations who are willing and able to pay the company to stage their work. This approach is advantageous for the company as it is paid a flat fee to perform the work a specified number of times. Often, this work will have already been devised so it is financially beneficial, as well as artistically fulfilling for the performers, to present this work in new contexts to new audiences. Part of ODC Ensemble's budget for the Creative Lenses Catalyst Programme was spent on staff with expertise in international tour management. Much of the work of the artistic director focuses on developing networks with an international audience. This is also linked to work on organisational branding: for example, being seen to produce work responding to the political situation in Greece has resulted in this becoming part of the company's brand, an attractive image for festival producers.

Linked to this, there was a strong perception that ODC Ensemble produced 'difficult' and 'challenging' work. Members of the company spoke of a loyal but small local and national audience for their productions and felt the content of their shows was more 'orientated towards the festival audiences'.²¹ These reflections locate the demand for its productions with the audience, when in fact it is the festival organisers who buy the performances and provide financial assistance for travel and other staging expenses.

Creative Lenses Catalyst project

ODC Ensemble used the Creative Lenses Catalyst project to refocus the company on its core purposes. This took shape across several related actions using the resources associated with Creative Lenses including financial investment, mentoring and discussion with international peers.

¹⁷ Unpublished project document, July 2017.

¹⁸ Unpublished project document, July 2017.

¹⁹ Unpublished project document, July 2017.

²⁰ Interview, February 2018.

²¹ Interview, February 2018.

Catalyst Project Action One: Relocation

The first action was concerned with finding a base that was cheaper to rent and maintain, took up less staff time in management and did not require intensive income-generation activities in order to pay costs. ODC Ensemble gave up its permanent physical space by closing Vyrsopeiseio. For the artistic director, this was about achieving a better balance:

*'How much of your activities are you really interested in and how much of the other activities should you do in order to balance and sustain? The space was not created as a business so I never saw myself as a business woman, so the moment that [time spent on managing the business] was higher it didn't make any sense.'*²²

ODC Ensemble still wanted a physical space, however. This was seen as important 'as a meeting point and as a power pressure to the political system and as an energy focus for the artistic team'.²³ With the availability of financial sources and mentoring from Creative Lenses, the organisation decided to rent a flat in central Athens. The initial plan was for this to be a rehearsal space (saving money on hiring spaces); an office; a space to store equipment; a residency studio to rent to other artists; and a rentable space to generate income via Airbnb. ODC Ensemble renovated the space with the view for it to be multifunctional, including offices which were quickly rented out. However, this attempt to secure parallel income streams was unsuccessful. The flat was not centrally located enough to attract visitors to the city. Further, anti-social behaviour in the building made it unattractive to staff, tenants, visitors and potential collaborators. After just a few months, ODC gave up the plan to rent it out for international residencies and for Airbnb.

Catalyst Project Action Two: Capacity-Building

The second group of actions undertaken during Creative Lenses were associated with capacity-building. One initiative was directed towards the organisation being able to build its international profile and show its work at international festivals. Generating fees from touring its productions was seen as central to its business model in the coming years: 'We realised that to give emphasis to international touring is crucial for us. Participation in key festivals and events and in showcase festivals to promote our performances, became our goal. The first prize in the BE Festival in Birmingham 'gave us the push to introduce our projects in the major festivals.'^{24, 25} To achieve this, ODC Ensemble engaged an agent to book the company at festivals, and an international touring manager to organise the dissemination of productions

and to refine the brand. ODC Ensemble estimated that this would increase its income by 25% from fees from participating in international festivals. A second and related initiative involved appointing a company manager with responsibility for increasing income from grants and cultural institutions and to produce more productions to sell.

Catalyst Project Action Three: Organisational Branding

A third group of actions supporting the renewed focus on creating and showing its productions was to create marketing materials. These included a new logo, website and also a producing a publication documenting the company's history. Producing this narrative will, the company hoped, increase visibility and demand for its productions, in particular internationally where the group hoped future revenues would grow. As part of this rebranding, ODC developed a new language for describing its performance:

*'ODC Ensemble makes theatre of the polis: theatre from, with and about citizens. ODC creates multidisciplinary performances that empower critical thinking with an emphasis on cutting edge music, new media and political discourse. ODC invents spaces of imagination that dislocate audiences beyond their comfort zone. The company fosters international partnerships in order to explore and break boundaries.'*²⁶

Results and Discussion

Against the background of economic crisis, lack of public investment in cultural infrastructure and reduced household incomes in Greece, ODC Ensemble has had to renegotiate its mission in what is a challenging environment for cultural producers as well as for audiences. Somewhat surprisingly this externally-driven change was not perceived by members of the organisation as resulting in any tension or constraining the company in any significant way. For interviewees, 'flux' and 'change' were seen to produce only enabling, not constraining, effects.

The priority for ODC Ensemble is to continue to perform the style of theatre staff see making them distinctive. As public subsidy from the Greek government is very limited, the company has looked to trans-national sources of funding to help finance its operations and to international festivals to pay for the staging of its performances. ODC Ensemble has turned outwards, towards European funding and towards international audiences as they shift from being a locally situated performing arts company to an internationally mobile group.

²² Interview, Athens, February 2018.

²³ Unpublished project document, July 2017.

²⁴ <http://befestival.org/>

²⁵ London workshop, 2018.

²⁶ London workshop, 2018.

This shift in emphasis from the local to the international requires a change in staff composition, calling for specific skills, and it influences decisions as to how scarce resources are spent. Tracing how the budget allocated to the company as part of their involvement in Creative Lenses was spent is an example of this. Alongside financing the renovation of the flat ahead of trialling becoming an accommodation provider as a parallel income-stream, ODC Ensemble invested the majority of the money in staff costs. The company's priority was to increase the invitations they receive to perform at major international festivals and to increase the number of touring destinations for their performances. These motivations require particular skills and integrating with the existing staff, by 'building a new team...giving emphasis on communication, international relations and touring management skills'.²⁷

Staff were able to reconcile the stories they told of the politically or socially transformative value of their practice with the accounts given of the way a changing funding landscape had resulted in the intended audience for their work becoming less local and more international by making the argument



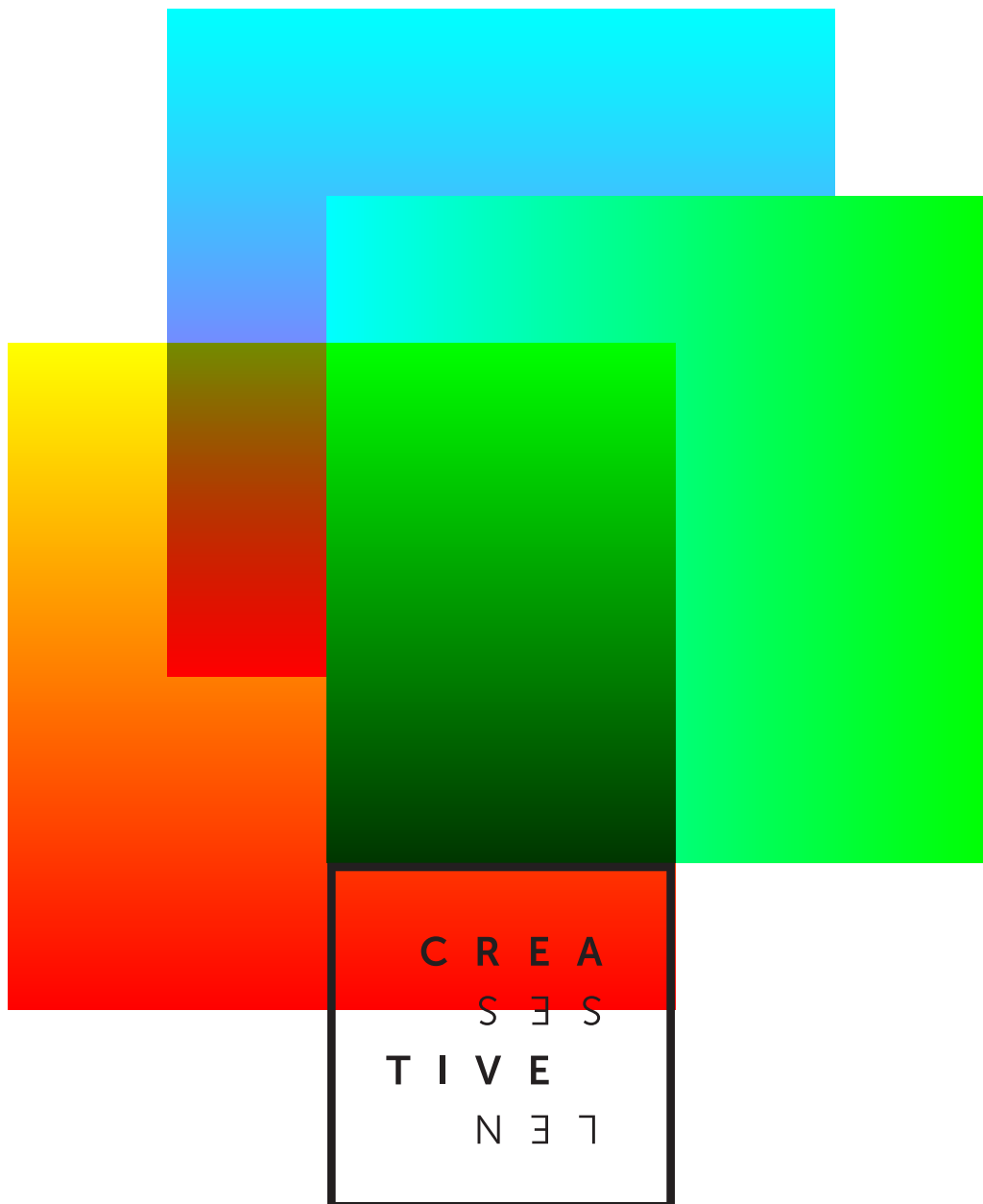
²⁷ Interview, Athens, February 2018.

that the content of the work had not changed. Tangible effects on audiences did not appear to be of concern to members of the company; instead the focus was on securing continued employment in the cultural sphere and a home for their creative activity. Questions about who is represented on stage and who consumes culture become of less importance in an organisation that is focussed on survival.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

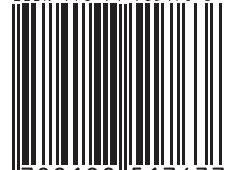
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ISBN 978-91-985176-3-7



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