

The bird experience

**- sharing discoveries and
reflections from a transnational
community art project**



Photo: from video by Dirk Schwarz

Times of transition

When the bird-creature was born in 2020 during the pandemic it almost immediately revealed to be not only a powerful symbolic creature, but also a facilitator, a mediator, which could intuitively invite people into safe and caring spaces, where they could transform intimate stories of grief into images, movement and sensations.

Europe is in a time of transition. Within a few years we have gone through a pandemic, seen war rise again on European ground and are facing a point of no return in realities of climate change.

When launching The bird experience as a Creative Europe project, five birds took shape created in the image of the original prototype. The siblings left for each their destination in Europe to meet and connect people, stories and sensations of grief.

Times of transition evokes sensations of loss. And with loss, comes grief. Because we depart with something, in order to transcend into something new. Something yet unknown. But do we leave space for grief? Do we embrace grief? Not only as individual processes, but also as collective actions?

The partners would locally facilitate the presence of the bird in their community, animate it, bring it to life and introduce it to local stories of grief that needed attention.

At all times the artists would remain with the bird in the local surroundings and birds and artists would only connect through video calls and by cultivating the narrative of the sibling flock and their parallel experiences in the other countries.

The concept of The bird experience was initiated to set in motion two connected visions;

- exploring collective transcendence of grief through community experiences and senses of belonging,
- locally as well as across borders.

- researching more sustainable formats of international collaboration and connection within the performing arts field.

The artistic concept was based on creating a sibling flock of the bird creature "SorgFuglen", who was

originally created in 2020 by NextDoor Project and puppetmaker Anette Asp Christensen.

The poetic bird-creatures would be the only travellers in the project, all artists would connect, collaborate and create from their local communities, building on;

- the shared artistic concept, presence and animation of the bird.

- simultaneity of actions local areas.

- moments of live-connection through video conference platforms.

Project design

- The consortium consisted of five **small scale companies** within dance & movement arts.

By small scale is referred to groups and companies financially building their activities within structures of project support, not having a studio or stage of their own, organised and producing their activities with project - or part time staff.

The partners were:

NextDoor Project - LEAD partner
Copenhagen, Denmark

ZITA Dance Company
Athens, Greece

Northern Sustainable Futures
Arvidsjaur, Sweden

The Symptoms
Budapest, Hungary

Cia Danza Vinculados
Granada, Spain

- None of the partners were specialised in or had their artistic practice established within video streaming art and would commonly explore new ground.

- The organisation of interactions and collaborations within the local communities was organized locally by each partner and the following targetgroups were chosen by the partners;

ZITA Dance Company, Athens
Migrant women in collaboration with Melissa Network.

Northern Sustainable Futures, Arvidsjaur
Assisted care home residents and senior citizens organised in collaboration with Arvidsjaur Municipality, as well as an additional group established through open call and personal invitations.

The Symptoms, Budapest
Groups of **citizens who lost their profession** established through open call. Additionally a collaboration with the Solar Eclipse Association.

Cia Danza Vinculados, Granada
Members of Cia Danza Vinculados company of **professional and community dancers from 6-80 years old with and without learning disabilities**.



Photo: Vasilis Liakos

NextDoor Project, Copenhagen
Refugee children and nursing home residents in collaboration with Welcome House and The care home "Slottet".

A set of actions was to be carried out by all partners;

- The bird would **facilitate a space for grief for local community groups/-members** throughout a series of sessions allowing the groups to work in depth with the theme.

- The bird would appear in 2-3 **unannounced pop-up events in the local surroundings**. This in order to create awareness about the birds residency in the area, the local relevance of the theme and possible to recruit more community members to join the projects as participants, audiences etc.

- The partners would commit to **regular video meetings** inbetween the artists.

- The partners would facilitate videomeeting between their community group and 2-3 of the

other partners and their respective groups.

- The partners would finalize the birds residency with a performance in the local community in the end, sharing the experiences and stories shared between citizens and bird. The performance would involve live streaming inbetween the 5 performance rooms.

- The partners would at the projects ending share footage and reflections from the process to be used for publication and take part in an international online seminar aimed at artists and culture workers, sharing experiences of working with the sustainable format of collaboration and connection.

This paper is published by LEAD partner NextDoor Project / artistic director Ingrid Trandum Velásquez with perspectives and reflections of partners and participants, sharing their experiences of The bird experience

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The project will not succeed in a zero co2 print. Video streaming, production of birds and freight, which are elements embedded in the project design, are not without CO2 print. However, it is a much smaller print of damage, than that which would have been left had the project been designed with travelling as our path to connection.

Balancing the potential experience of artists, participants and audiences with the environmental costs of the artistic tools, this format is what was explored, keep a quite extensive collaboration between 5 countries at minimal environmental costs.



Photo: Karin Ahnfeldt-Rønne

Embracing the inconvenient

The performing arts, building its field of practice on creativity and innovation, could naturally be forerunners of researching, investigating and shaping new ways of production meeting the need for collective transition into more sustainable life on our shared planet. But are we taking the necessary steps? Or do we still struggle to accept the urgency?

Within the performing arts field, there are many steps to be made; creating and producing from sustainable materials, recycling, renting and sharing resources rather than buying, prioritizing local suppliers with a sustainable policy, minimizing internet storage...AND changing our privileged travelling habits into the least sustainable choice and only practicing the absolute necessary travels. Bearing in mind, that travelling was only ever a privilege for the few seen in a global perspective, this should not present such a big challenge.

But it does, because touring and international collaboration is an integrated part of many performing artists practice. Being there, meeting, sensing, exchanging and experiencing live, is often where we get the most inspired. However, being aware that live contact is nuanced, fulfilling, desired and inspiring, and also appreciating the beauty of wanting to meet live in a world more and more dominated by digital relations, I still insist that we need to explore other ways.

Because the inconvenient truth is, that our travelling habits come at the highest price.

For somebody else.

For somebody else, living at the forefront of climate change, the price has already been paid.

Fleeing flooded homes, drought, starvation and death are daily consequences while we still in Europe struggle to accept the urgency.

Leaving a world of chaos and disaster to our own grandchildren, should be motivation enough, yet we hesitate.

We implement small changes, in a tempo not in any way fast enough to prevent disaster. For somebody else.

Belonging to a field of creativity and curiosity, we have the best cards at hand, to embrace the inconvenient transition with both professionalism and wonder. Knowing, that in all obstacles, is also a yet unknown gift of undiscovered potential, undiscovered poetry, new artistic ground.

If we are to succeed in a collective transition towards practicing more sustainable life on this planet, we need to carefully evaluate every movement, and hand to heart, question if it is necessary. So, how much of our travel, is absolutely necessary? And how could we even answer to this question,

if we have not yet truly surrendered into exploring the potential of alternatives, not yet attempted to depart the known ways, in order for the new inspiring potential to reveal itself to us.

In order to explore, it was necessary to first surrender to the fact that this will be inconvenient. Frustrating. Worrying. And to embrace the inconvenience, leaving behind what we know, what we thrive in, meeting the new, not only as a substitute for the old, but as an individual newborn potential of its own artistic value.

For me, it is very difficult to perceive, get to know and connect with people in a complex way only through the screen. The five of us had never worked together before. It is very difficult to understand each other's thinking and situation, to create the framework for cooperation with only online meetings.

At the same time, every occasion when we left the usual framework of zoom meetings and connected with each other through movement, gestures, and composing the space was very inspiring.

***- Reka, artistic director
The Symptoms, Hungary.***

So far, we strongly feel that stories are shared, experiences are common and feelings are communal. This sense of connection between us has not been demanding so far, a physical connection. We can feel connected through our honest and personal stories, through mental, telepathic transmission and mind travelling between these 5 European countries. We feel connected through our shared experiences, stories and common grief.
***-Iris Karayan, artistic director
Zita Dance Company, Greece.***

The inherent poetry of imagination

Online communication and simultaneity of actions is in its nature composed by less layers of information compared to a physical meeting. But what if we challenge the obvious urge to say that anything but a live-connection is a less intense connection, when it comes to artistic expression.

Though a physical contact will always win in layers and nuances, we might overlook a poetry dwelling in the imagination stirred by distance and glimpses.

A penpal was a quite popular concept when I was a child. The concept was simple. A pen and a paper and somebody far away, with whom you could exchange letters.

The connection created through this long distance relation, sharing worlds and experiences through words, perhaps occasionally a photograph or even small object, was anything but weak.

A strong sensation of connecting across space was created, because the imagination was triggered through the little information there was available. Connections can be build on fragile lines, when there is a desire to connect. And the fragility of sparse information can be a powerful source of awakening the imagination.

As an artist based in movement and bodyexpression, physical connectivity

is the realm I am most comfortable and familiar with, but choreography and movement is in no danger of loosing its attachment to the body, so we can safely be free to experiment with choreographing the mind and composing mental images and relations.

From an artistic point of view these are powerful tools to work with. Parametres that we can unfold and compose in all aspects of the process.



Photo: Vasilis Liakos

Creating connections

Experiencing kinship through the shared artistic creature and senses of belonging through simultaneity and recognition

Without the bird, exchange and connection may have been achieved to some degree through simultaneity of processes, video meetings and -streaming. But the immediate kinship felt through the shared relation to the birds, would not have been achieved.

This immediate kinship was essential to opening an emotional connection between the places.

Stirring the inherent imagination of participants and audiences, this kinship was felt even before any image was shared. Simply by sharing the story of the flock of siblingbirds and bringing awareness of their parallel journeys into the room, a connection was felt.

Being based in the field of movement and choreography, there is a unique potential in expanding our practice to embrace the composition of parallel movements, parallel sensations, even across borders.

The awareness of the siblings movements became a poetic tool to tune into connection with the other places and people.

A connection which intensity was amplified and composed through words, images, video and live-streaming.



Photo: Andreas Graham

We included the EU partners in our everyday conversations with our participants in various ways, from including the topics of the theme, as well as from the bird perspective, what the other birds are experiencing and if we could fly overseas to join them.

We practically shared and showed video and photo material from the other processes and countries as well as connecting digitally with each other.

We included and referred to the other birds/ EU partners as family/ siblings in our artistic work and performance, wanting to tie our group together with the others around Europe and create a sense of community.

*- Linda Remahl, artistic director
Northern Sustainable Futures, Sweden.*

The greatest inspiration for me in this project was the bird itself. I think this very strong symbolic creature was really very strong and effective and we could use it in very different ways. It helped a lot to go deep emotionally. In a very simple and strong way it made the connections between the five groups.

- Réka Szabó, artistic director The Symptoms, Hungary.

We collaborated with the other 5 companies through sharing online, sharing how we work with our bird. It was very interesting to see how each company was dealing with their own bird.

Images and stories and knowledge of the other birds affected our sense of connectivity. But for us it lacked a bit of the impact due to the online work and not the face to face work. For us, we would have liked to work in a more extensive and in depth process.

*- Carmen Vilches, artistic director
Cia Danca Vinculados, Spain.*

The project has generated a feeling of belonging and community for me not only at a local level, within the company, but at a global level. It's a topic that affects everyone, that connects us.

- Dancer, Cia Danza Vinculados, Spain

Of course, it has made me feel part of the great human community, in addition to belonging to Cía. Danza Vinculados.

- Dancer, Cia Danza Vinculados, Spain

The Bird Experience in Athens has been building a strong local network with migrant women who are linked to the Melissa organization. These women have arrived in Athens each one having her own story of grief and many memories. During the project we are attempting to create connections, links and entanglements between the various participants from the 5 partner European cities. Since this is an EU trans-national project and we are based in our own local context with singular characteristics in many aspects, our main aim is to create a sense of community both locally and trans-nationally. The project has been inspiring new modes of collaboration, trans-national connections and artistic co-creation. We attempt to achieve a strong bond within our local community of women, one that promotes care, safe spaces and good practices, welcoming our interactions with our EU partners and their formed community groups. Working on concept of grief, it's symbolic and visual representation by the figure of the bird, accomplishes a trans-mediated connection and creative experience between all community members and partners.

-Iris Karayan, artistic director ZITA Dance Company, Greece.



Photo: Viktória Dányi

Inherent in the shared figure and the immediate recognition and felt kinship is a sensation of not being alone. The experience of 'a greater human community'.

This connection we also amplified in the beginning of the performance, where the five birds appeared in the local landscapes of the community they had nested in, while immediately after cutting into a live view of the other performance rooms.

This sensation of kinship through the bird, linking places and people, is the greatest potential in this work, and though it also came with a lot of practical technical struggles, the moments of live-streaming added a sense of liveness to it, of real time presence, that has a great artistic potential embedded. Challenges of technicalities and practice is a matter solved by more time (which we get into later), but the potential of real time presence in the room weaved together with the story of the sibling birds holds a potential of awakening strong senses of human kinship, which is greatly needed in a more and more fragmented world built on inequalities.

Kinship can be facilitated through art, embracing us with a feeling of not being alone and evoking empathy across distance.

Before the performance we introduced to the audiences, that there were 4 siblings and told where in Europe they were nesting, whom they had met and with this 'setting the scene' for the streaming images they were soon to witness.

I believe that these very short and concrete explanations, that still maintained the poetic realism of the project and its symbolic concept, made it easier to connect to the images that was then seen when streaming into the other rooms.

Also the awareness that we started the performances at the complete same time in the five cities, gave the sensation of being part of something wider than what happened in our room.

A transnational community? A sensation of not being alone in the emotions of human life?

- Ingrid Trandum Velásquez, artistic director

NextDoor Project, Denmark.

In order to reinforce the international context of the project in the minds of the audience, the performance started with an audio recording in which Réka Szabó outlined the Hungarian and international framework of the programme, helping the audience to connect with the moments of the stream.

Streaming, an element that appeared three times during the performance, also placed the Hungarian participants' loss rite in a broader context.

order for participants to experience the cross-border nature of the programme, two pop-up meetings were organised with Greek and Spanish participants. These meetings were a great experience for the Hungarian participants.

- Artistic director Réka Szabó & dramaturg Zsuzsca Simányi

The Symptoms, Hungary.

It is very unique that it is happening also in Europe. Grief is everywhere. It is a part of life.

It is not something we should just get rid of. Its ok that it is there.

That it takes time. And that we can share it. It can connect people.

- Nursing home resident, Copenhagen, Denmark.

I am so happy that I joined. That I am involved as it has really given me a lot.

The fact that it's broadcasted in several countries and it deals with happiness and grief an everything that can happen in life

- Senior citizen, Arvidsjaur, Sweden.

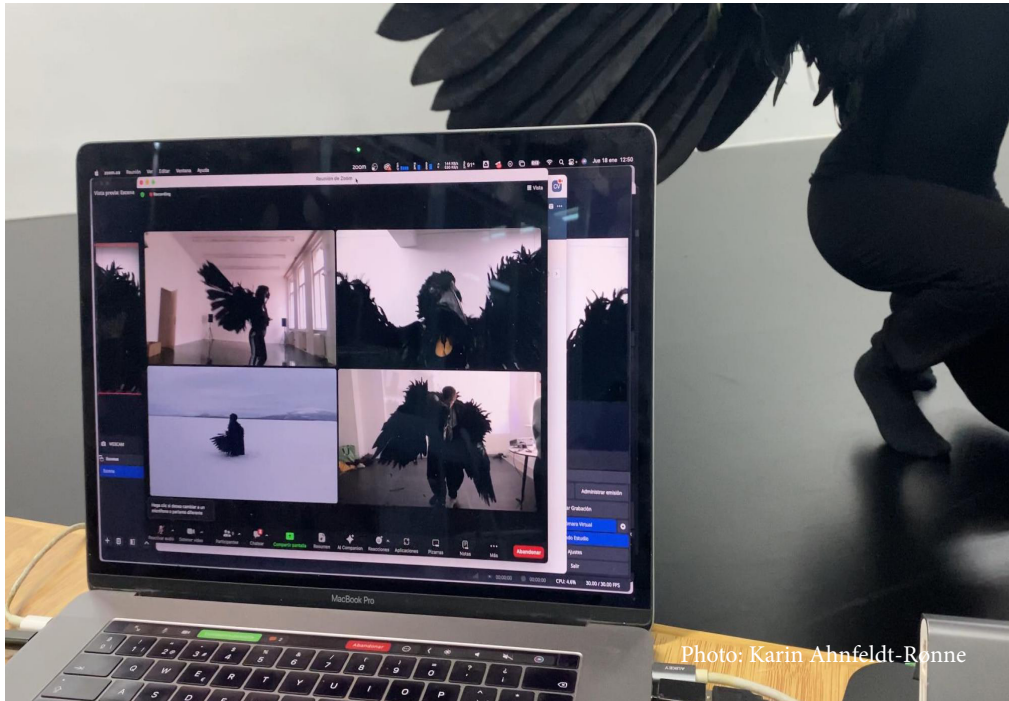


Photo: Karin Ahnfeldt-Ronne

The limitations and the sensuous potential of a fragile live-streaming connection

During the process we had to balance urges to create a common piece in the moments of live-streaming, with simply welcoming the shared connection and images into the room. And with it the unpredictability of live streaming.

The limitations lies in the lack of control. We can do our best technically to achieve a stability in the connection, but we can not plan our way out of the unpredictability that comes with internet connection being the line between the rooms.

In our room in Copenhagen the fragility of the live streaming somehow set the intensity of the room. We were sitting together waiting for the others to begin. The performance took place in a church and we decided to only allow a quite small audience group inside, so it had quite an emotional impact to sit there waiting together for when all five partners were ready to start. Feeling both the fragility and strength of the vulnerable line connecting the five places. Knowing they were there. Feeling they were there. And then releasing the build up desire to connect, into the moment where all the birds appeared on the screen in their five landscapes.
- Ingrid Trantum Velásquez, artistic director
NextDoor Project, Denmark.

However, when phraming, staging, even amplifying the fragility of the connection in the room, it can even add to the intensity of the moment.

The internet connection has a build in fragility in its presence. We all know that it can at any time disappear and leave us blinded in the relation. This fragility is, if used as an artistic parameter, a texture that we can learn and practice to embrace, even amplify, when using it as an artistic tool.

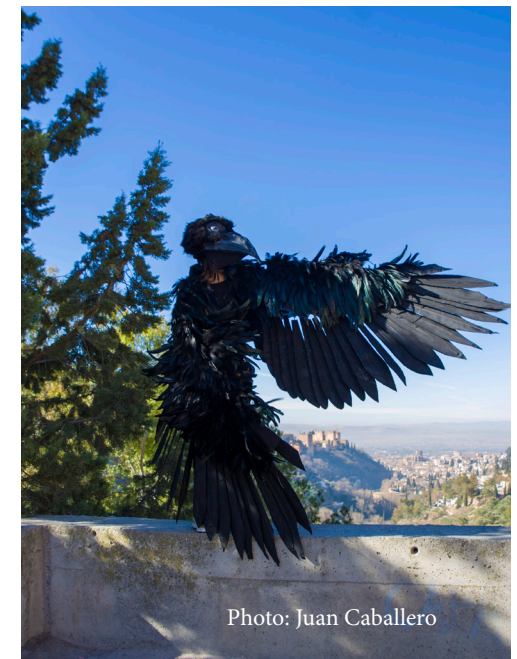


Photo: Juan Caballero



Photo: Linda Remahl

Weaving together the local and global

The project had a build-in weaving of the local and the global. While providing a platform for the partners deep local engagement in their community they would at the same time connect this to a greater community across borders

In the local context very strong communities were created and nurtured between participants, artists and birds.

We approached the concept of grief as an embodied experience, an experience which is shared.

Our methodology was to create a safe and caring space for expression coming together and creatively work as a group. In this way grief did not initiate feelings of fear but became a mediator for our stories, memories, dreams and hopes for the future.

*- Iris Karayan, artistic director
ZITA Dance Company, Greece*

The concept gave us a lot of freedom. All the five partners. So we could work with our own way, following our own motivation and wishes. Using the streaming during the performance we cut put the theme of grief into a larger perspective. It gave rally the feeling that grief is a common human feeling, for all of us. It connected the whole Europe, I think.

*- Reka Szabó, artistic director
The Symptoms, Hungary*

We chose this target group because we wanted to highlight the lives, memories and experiences of people over +65. We also wanted to create an artistic outcome that was a co-creation, where the +65s were given a voice and their experiences were shared with the audience.

- Linda Remahl, artistic director

Northern Sustainable Futures, Sweden.

I felt that I was finally heard and seen. I am not alone. I can share my feelings with others.

I am accepted and not questioned.

- Citizen who lost their profession, Hungary

The bird opens peoples longing to share and express in a visual poetic language. This also shaped our performance, where both participants and audiences where invited on stage to dance with the bird. Working with the presence of an animated being, allows us to forget or bypass the conscious self and express with all senses. Sharing this open-hearted room between bird, participants and professional performers created a very strong community. A sense of community that had fx been greatly missed at the nursing home.

- Ingrid TRanum Velásquez, artistic director, NextDoor Project, Denmark.

*It fills a gap. I have been missing this.
It has helped me a lot. The connection. What the bird and
images opens. It opens people. I have been missing a place
to share there things.
Nursing home resident, Denmark.*

*It has helped me a lot. The connection. What the bird and
images opens. It opens people. I have been missing a place
to share there things.
The grief became a community. I was not alone with it
anymore.
It speaks not to the mind but to the heart, to the body.
- Nursing home resident, Denmark.*

*Our users with Down syndrome who attended the show
are peers from our association's training program, and
they were amazed by the great work their peer did.
They watched the entire show, focusing on what Anabel
was doing, and made comments like:
"What a great show. Anabel looks beautiful.
She did great. It was fantastic. I loved it."
- The Down Syndrome Association of Granada,
Down Granada, Spain*

*We find that, in addition to the artistic concept, the Bird
Experience Project contains many possibilities that can
create community in the Hungarian society, which is
strongly divided as a result of the reigning political
operation. One of the important elements of our
Ars poetica is that we believe in the power of dialogue
and strive towards understanding with all possible
means. That is why we considered it very important that,
in addition to the performance, we also create side
projects to which as many interested parties as possible
can connect.
-Artistic director Réka Szabó & dramaturg Zsuzca Simányi, The
Symptoms, Hungary.*

*Réka was in a very difficult mourning process, because after a long dilemma,
she decided that she could no longer continue working with a fixed
company, as the government made it impossible for independent
companies to survive. She had to let go of the company's previous form and
find new ways to operate.
Based on her personal experience, Réka became extremely concerned
about how society reacts on those who mourn the loss of their profession.
Réka shared her dilemmas with Kinga Kánya (grief consultant-sociologist
PHD student ELTE Hungary). Kinga talked about legal and non legal grieving.
She said the loss of a profession is a kind of non-legal grief in our society.
While the pain associated with death is accepted by society, the loss of a
profession is not treated as a real loss. According to public opinion: 'life is
going on', that person is 'gonna find a new job' and 'there is no point in
crying over it', 'she or he is still alive or healthy', 'there are other beautiful
things in life' etc.
-Artistic director Réka Szabó & dramaturg Zsuzca Simányi,
The Symptoms, Hungary.*

These strong local engagements and the urgent felt presence of the local was in the project allowed to take their needed space. Balancing the physical present experience with the online presence, should not be a competition, but two different presences, that can compliment and expand each other.

The strong local engagement was also, what graved path for the greater human community to establish itself.

Being informed about the themes and target groups in other countries, we think that the community of content is strengthened by the fact that both refugees and groups with cognitive or physical disabilities or dementia are on the margins of society, and this marginalisation cannot be described as country-specific.

Artistic sirector Reká Szabó & dramaturg Zsuzsca Simányi, The Symptoms, Hungary.



Photo: Oscar Matínez

Building the road as we walk and reflections on time

The regularity of meetings was essential, especially with a consortium consisting of projectbased groups, who parallel to the project were engaged in many different activities and productions. The regularity kept the project present at mind during a longer period and enabled it to mature in the background of other activities.

Despite the initially monthly, and later weekly videomeetings of 1-2 hours, a lack of time was felt.

The regularity of the returning partner meetings has created a sense of extended connection and sharing an interesting feeling of a parallel cause.

-Linda Remahl, artistic director, Northern Sustainable Futures, Sweden.

The shared equal and democratic process between the five partners has at times been challenging as we feel it takes time to invite, share and expose ourselves fully to each other's artistic processes and ways of working. The process is multi-faceted as it encompasses different structures, resources, ways of working and approaching work. As usual one often wishes to have more time spent to delve further into discussions, and sometimes we feel that it would be beneficial to have had longer sessions together for the work to progress quicker.
- Linda Remahl, Artistic director, Northern Sustainable Futures, Sweden.

We discovered that it is possible to collaborate online, but we also discovered that much more time was needed, to generate group bonding, to understand how the other artists and communities are working.
- Carmen Vilches, artistic director Cia Danza Vinculados, Spain

Within the initial vision of the project was also to connect more people from the artistic teams through the meetings. This was challenged by schedules and resources of the partners, and only some partners had the possibility to at occasions have colleagues along. So the meetings primarily constituted a meeting platform between the five artistic leaders. I believe there to be an unexplored potential in this wider connection of the artistic team, binding the exchange of parallel productions and perspectives together. However, working with small scale companies with limited resources, it would demand more resources to the project, to also unfold that potential.

In general, working with online based collaboration and cooperation, revealed a need for more time in general. It takes longer time to get to know and understand each other practices and local realities. Also working with live streaming as a new field, meant that there was spent much time on technical issues related to the medium. Again, with more resources, and thus more time, there would be possibility to both allow the necessary technical research to take place, while also facilitating more expanded artistic exchange between the partners.

We were in the project building the road as we walked, but lacking time enough to establish common ground before each step.

Departing with the known ways also included interacting with the video conference room with new intentions. The expansion of our comprehension of a video call 'space' took time. We had a series of video meetings where we took turns to host the space and investigate the artistic potential of the video conference room. This format worked very well, to both collectively explore the artistic potential in the space and to experience moments of each others artistic practice and thinking. When we worked with camera angles, shared objects, composition of movement, the video conference platform did transform into an artistic space that expanded the known sensation we had of a video conference situation.

As the artistic vision of the final performances grew it was a challenge to balance experiment with decision making, democracy with leadership.

It is a great challenge to create and operate the shared moments in the performance, so that they are not just formal "decorations", but scenes with real and pure artistic intent. Sometimes I have the feeling that we should start the project again now, with all the experience we have gathered so far.

***- Reka Szabo, artistic director
The Symptoms, Hungary.***

Both remaining in the research and curiosity of the format and its possibilities and meeting the increasing pressure of presenting a product (performances) became towards the end, a challenge, that again raised issues of time.

Where time is almost always in shortage when nearing the finalization of a performance, there is, embedded in the online collaboration an even greater need for time as it takes longer time to exchange realities, in order to find common ground.



Photo: Viktória Dányi



Photo: Viktória Dányi

Though challenged of time and technique very strong and poetic sensations of connection and community accrued around and inbetween the five birds.

Choreographing and composing movement between people, places, sensations and images is an understanding of choreography , that welcomes a potential to facilitate connection and collaboration across borders, building on mental travel and evoking the inherent poetry of the imagination. Investing artistic engagement and resources in revealing and expanding this potential with sincere curiosity will make us qualified to answer the critical and necessary question; when is travel absolutely necessary?



Photo: Karin Ahnfeldt-Rønne



Photo: Jerry Salas

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