CULTURE CROSSROADS

OF LOSING TOUCH AND TAKING PLACE: MAKING PERFORMING ARTS SETTINGS AT THE FRINGES

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

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Abstract

This special issue is interested in the processes of creating performing arts settings, including spaces for dance, arts festivals, and theatre performances, during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors explore the continuities and changes in the configurations of performing arts settings and ask about their transformative potential. The cultural initiatives in focus are located at the fringes of geo-political complexities: They take place in Cyprus's Buffer Zone, around a palace in post-Prussian North Poland, within Russia's Irish dance community, in Latvia's theatrical community. This issue further ethnographically records and interrogates challenges and odds in making performing art settings during and beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic. It finds that different experiences of "losing touch" and detachment become inseparably linked with practices of entanglement, shaping the possibility of "taking place" in performing arts settings. Methodologically, the authors in this issue bridge the commonly upheld gap between research and practice in the fields they discuss, transgressing the boundaries between ethnography, socio-cultural analysis, and engaged research.

Leaving the Capsule

(..)
Now it's time to leave the capsule if you dare
This is Major Tom to Ground Control
I'm stepping through the door (..)

For here
Am I sitting in a tin can
Far above the world
Planet Earth is blue
And there's nothing I can do

Ground Control to Major Tom
Your circuit's dead, there's something wrong
Can you hear me, Major Tom?
(..)

From "Space Oddity", David Bowie 1969

In David Bowie's "Space Oddity", protagonist Major Tom stages the ancient drama of detachment and isolation from the rest of humanity making it relevant for his contemporaries in the novel form of what Houghton [2022: 433] has called "cosmic solitude"[1]. While remotely guided by the questionable directives of a ground control station, Major Tom remains totally on his own, circulating the earth solitarily in a tin-can-like rocket. As doing so, he is then expected to open the doors and step into a new reality, the risks of which no one can fully calculate. Will he get hurt? Will he return home? Where and what is home? Suddenly, a creeping sense of losing touch with everything familiar hits him and a voice suggests that the connection is breaking up, "Can you hear me, Major Tom, can you hear me?", the voice starts crackling. Major Tom, locked up in the movement of the tin capsule looks out onto the earth and doesn't seem to have an answer what to do next.

Major Tom in his rocket has always functioned as a metaphor of shifting meanings, a myth-in-the-making: By creating the image of Major Tom, David Bowie and his production team managed to give shape to a blurry feeling of detachment and nostalgia bringing together over millions of listeners, who could identify with losing touch and perhaps, in a next step, with a deep longing to reconnect and heal from alienation and estrangement. This special issue of "Culture Crossroads" is about exactly this: the sense of detachment from each other and the longing to reconnect,

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[1] *Soledad cósmica.*

and its complicated materialisation through the making of spaces for artistic and cultural encounter.

The special issue was born out of a conference panel at EASA 2022 in Belfast entitled "Creating Performing Arts Settings Against the Odds", in which the contributors started to reflect on the complexity of odds (and oddities) in the sphere of producing spaces and places in the loosely defined cultural and artistic domain. The debate had been ignited by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which artists, producers and audiences were confronted to deal with alien conditions for cultural productions that followed health concerns and severely limiting legislations towards their activities that aimed at reducing the spread of the virus. One aspect particularly worthwhile discussing further with respect to the performing arts, were emerging experiences and popularising definitions of space, place and event. During the COVID-19 pandemic, radically rethinking and re-making space and place in everyday practice became a central and shared social concern, and for many even an existential challenge, notably for individuals in the performing arts: it included navigating social life between lockdown, cancellations, the "hybrid" and the "remote", new (old) borders, and constantly shifting spatial governance, while often facing existential economic hardship and the fear of health risks. Following Emil Durkheim's [1938, 1895] and Marcel Mauss's [2002, 1925] concepts of the "total social fact", many social scientists have proposed to read the global pandemic as such, a phenomenon that affects everyone, is external to the actor and (im)mobilizes entire societies [Vandenberghe and Véran 2021: 174; see also Demertzis and Eyerman 2020, Ghahramani et al. 2021, Santos et al. 2020]. As COVID-19 became a normative condition overnight across the globe, impacting the arts community and cultural live events at an unknown scale [Woodward and Haynes 2023: 2; cf. Völkl, Obermayr & Hobisch 2023; Bruzzi 2022], it seemed crucial to start a nuanced conversation about processes of making performing arts settings during and since this time that was based on ethnographic insights. In this issue the authors advance this conversation by finding situated answers to how the geo-political and socio-economic conditions of COVID-19 interacted with other site- and event-specific challenges; how meaningful the Pandemic was for shaping the intersections of pre-existing challenges; how spatial, social, and aesthetic configurations of performing arts events developed over longer periods of times, and what influenced this development.

Transformative Events and their Institutional Entanglements

Among the performing arts settings discussed in this issue are two festivals, a street parade, an experimental theatre performance, a transnational dance network, and a research collaboration. While each of them tells a different story of "taking

place" and "losing touch", they share the promise of being transformative events – in one way or another – to their participants, co-creators and the broader contexts in which they find themselves.

Furthering Erving Goffman's [1959] writings, the work of performance theorists Victor Turner and Richard Schechner [1985a; 1985b] on performativity and the liminal has suggested that theatre and other, for instance, traditional sacred performance settings, can be understood as extraordinary spaces, in which individuals co-fabricate existential changes. These changes affect who individuals identify as and how they relate to their respective community; they can happen instantaneously (linear transition) or gradually (through repeated cycles of transportation) [Turner and Schechner 1985b: 131], in very different performative traditions. *"Theatre and ordinary life are a möbius strip, each turning into the other.",* the authors write [1985a: 14], emphasising the embedded role of theatre in shaping social experience. In recent years, these arguments have been deepened through an increasing interest in performing arts settings as transformative social spaces that bear the possibility of future-making and re-worlding [Tinius and Flynn 2015; Salzbrunn and Moretti 2020; Kazubowski-Houston, M. and M. Auslander 2021, Rai et al. 2021]. In this vein, recent publications on the subject have reasserted the Brechtian understanding of performance spaces as politically transformative place-takings suggesting

> *"political and ideological battles often play out through artistic performances and cultural forms, while political sites and actors take on theatrical dimensions and strategies"* [Rai et al. 2021:6].

Anthropologists further started to ask questions about the relationship between the conditions under which certain art settings and cultural events are produced and the creative outcomes and socio-cultural possibilities that emerge from these performing art settings [cf. Picard 2016; Oleksiak 2019; Pistrick 2020]. In her doctoral thesis, Julie Oleksiak asserts that

> *"the creation of musical performances and works cannot be thought, researched, analysed independently without taking account of the institutions that allow them to exist and the agents who make this institution exist as they are using it as a resource of action"* [Olesiak, 2020: Resume].

She further emphasizes the political positionality of the programme director or artistic producer as standing at the crossroads of strategy and creativity. This perspective makes an important part of the articles in this special issue: in their field sites, the authors set out to discuss the processes of making performing art settings, often focusing on producing roles and the power relations in these processes. In that

vein, Nihal Soganci and Ellada Evangelou investigate the political backdrop of the buffer zone in Nicosia, Cyprus, and its effect on the nature of Buffer Fringe Festival; Hannah Wadle discusses the longue durée history of funding politics in the German-Polish cultural realm and the making of an interdisciplinary community festival in former East Prussia; Alexandra Glaskovskaya examines the effects of politicization within an internationally operating Irish dance network on the dancers; and Muktupāvela and Laķe debate changing concepts of theatrical "presence" within the institutional context of Latvia before, during and after the pandemic.

To sum up the questions that emerge from these preceding considerations for this issue: firstly, what emerges is an inquiry into the transformative horizons of the discussed settings and into the political agency that might be experienced through them, secondly, it is the question how these horizons have been affected and altered through changes within institutional frameworks of taking place, and thirdly, there is a question about the individuals and groups involved in making and negotiating performing arts settings and about their multiple motivations to do so.

Taking Place

Performing arts settings often face precarious financial, legal, political and weather-bound conditions. Furthermore, they have to be accommodating to different audiences and accompany the creative processes of artists with their often highly unusual approaches to the spatial. In her work about creative processes in organising a parade event in Manchester (UK), Jessica Symons describes the inherent uncertainty and, in tandem with it, organisational resilience of what she calls "shaping the flow" of the community-based art production.

> "*They know that the parade will happen, that all the elements within it will take a very particular shape on the day and also that they cannot be sure exactly what that shape might be. (..) A preparedness to adapt runs throughout every aspect of the parade development and it seems that the parade is only possible because of the organisers' capacity to respond productively to obstacles*" [Symons 2016: 702].

Symons's work shows the event and performing arts setting as a process of continuous attending to difficult circumstances in order to facilitate the performing arts event and create the conditions for its "taking place". A recent study of queer and feminist art spaces in North America by Erin Silver [2023] adds a longer-term perspective to researching "taking place" in the arts: it unpacks how spatial characteristics have interacted with understandings of activist, gendered cultural production from the late 1960s to the present, and how individuals are engaging with art spaces on the backdrop of those histories. Observations like Symons's

[2016] and Silver's [2023], strongly suggest that creating performing arts settings involves complex, novel spatiotemporal practices and discursive processes, to which ethnographies can add valuable observations. With this suggestion in mind, this special issue suggests that looking at the re-configurations of some of these settings in a broader context of the COVID-19 health crisis and beyond it, can bring thought-provoking insights into contemporary reconfigurations of place-making and place-taking. The proposition is hence to look more closely at the making of performance art settings and at the complexities of inventing places on the backdrop of what could be hypothetically viewed as a global paradigm shift in how we make and experience space [cf. Komninou 2022; Abd Elrahman 2021].

Starting the enquiry from the COVID-19 health crisis and its spatial epistemologies and continuing it with questions about the conditions for creating performing art settings, this special issue calls for a new curiosity in the politics and practice of "taking place" and of "losing touch". The field of tension between these two processes and their intersections casts light on diverse engagements with the spatial without discriminating between their permanence and without imposing definitions of place or event that assert a fixed perspective on the creation of the social. "Taking place" here has the connotation of something that happens, occurs, that is sited and contextualized through its situatedness. It is closely related to the concept of event, in which Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison see much potential for exploring futurity, permanence and ideas of the possible:

> "*The question of the event opens up a further set of issues about how to create and sustain events; how to bear and extend the potential that events open up, the sense of promise and futurity that they may hold?*" [Anderson and Harrison 2010: 23]

With "taking place" this issue addresses events or event-places[1] as a process with uncertain course and outcomes. It starts from the Lefebvrian [Lefebvre (1974) 1991] proposition that space and the spatial (including place) are actively made and constantly (re-) produced in social processes – engaging the struggles and power relations that are present in society. The capacity of the concept of "taking place" to illuminate creative spatial processes has also been taken up with respect to art spaces: "Taking Place reveals the space of art as a temporary work in progress", writes

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[1] Following historian Philip Ethington [2007: 483] and philosopher Edward Casey [2007: 510], who agree on the congruence of place and event, adding the different emphasis that lies on each notion, with the former foregrounding the spatial, and the latter the temporal. In their otherwise heated debate about the boundary, place and event for placing and mapping the past, they agree with each other that "all events are places and vice versa".

curator of the exhibition Beatrix Ruf[1] in the opening remark to "*Michael Elmgreen & Ingar Dragset: Taking Place*" at Kunsthalle Zürich in 2001–2002. The artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset's work has titillated been installations and performative works, offering critical commentaries about social constructions of space and, more recently, the human body. "Taking place" hence further alludes to the active social struggles and political processes during which places are taken – places taken for the use of performing arts settings, for encounters through art, for communities of practitioners, or also places taken away from the possibility of staging performing arts and creating encounters.

The title of the special issue thus highlights the political, institutional, and moral struggles that are inherent to the making of performing art settings, which, more often than not, happen in complex spatial configurations with the trajectory to address, if not even to subvert or transform, these configurations through the different spatialities they propose as part of their individual agendas of "taking place". "Taking place" is thus a form of entanglement and of getting involved. Or as historian Philip Ethington notes:

> "*All action, whether building pyramids, making love, writing, or reading, takes and makes place; all individuals are the creative authors of their own presence*" [Ethington 2007: 484].

Following Ethington's definition, actions of taking and making place give a clue about the multiple ways in which humans become co-authors of historical processes through their entanglements. It is a concept that recognizes and emphasizes the individual agency and creativity in shaping one's everyday presence. Its shortcomings in addressing the inequalities and struggles that reside in each process of taking place may be supplemented with the leitmotiv in the existential anthropology of Michael Jackson, which describes the dilemma of the human condition as a constant jockeying between acting and being acted upon. Art and ritual, he argues, are not only social phenomena, but what he calls ontologically "primitive" modes of action that affect emotions, body and consciousness:

> "*One effect of such action is to transform subject-object relations, such that a person comes to experience herself as an actor and not just acted upon – as a "who" and not merely a "what"*" [Jackson 2016: 155].

What is yet missing in the previously quoted works is a recognition of more-than-human agency and the participation of more-than-human actors in processes

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[1] Michael Elmgreen & Ingar Dragset: Taking Place, exhibition of Kunsthalle Zurich, 10.11.2001–20.01.2002. Available: https://www.kunsthallezurich.ch/en/ausstellungen/963-elmgreen-dragset (viewed 01.11.2023.)

of making and taking place. And it is precisely the eventful presence of such more-than-human micro agents that was crucial to other processes of taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dixon and Jones [2015: 227; 230] propose the notion of *tactile topology* to account for the creation, occupying and traversing of more-than human spaces through touch and to address the porosity of the body to non-human micro-organisms. In the face of viral presence and it taking place,

> "*[i]t is through touch that the body becomes vulnerable to the potentially patho-logical and not-so-distant other – putting us at constant risk of being penetrated, invaded and over-run by the micro's ever-proliferating inhabitants,*"

Dixon and Jones [2015: 230] write in their prophetic discussion of the movie *Contagion*. Seen from the human stance, touching becomes a potentially, threatening event that could initiate an unwanted process of "taking place" in the body. The suddenly appearing eventful nature of viral tactility during the COVID-19 Pandemic must hence be part of an emerging, contextual understanding of "taking place" for the purpose of this issue.

What we embrace for this collection of articles as we ethnographically explore processes of "taking place" are hence four aspects of the concept: the inherent, ongoing struggles over place and events; the human and non-human agency and their tactile topologies; the making of individual and shared "presence(s)" through creative and proactive entanglements; and the potential of performing art settings to radically affect and re-balance the perception of subjectivity in groups and individuals.

Losing Touch

In the viral scenario of COVID-19 and its emerging tactile topologies, "losing touch", became one of the central premises for re-inventing social relationships and their spatial dimensions in new, initially temporary forms during COVID-19. The condition of physical distancing and isolation that served as tool for addressing the transmission of COVID-19 was based on efforts of detaching the social from the physical, of deconstructing this relationship. These efforts were followed by reassembling the relationship between the physical and the social afresh, including new tools of regulation and governance.

At the same time, different groups of individuals had very diverse experiences of detachment: While for gig-workers in the platform economy, losing touch translated into a work of non-encounters and boredom that was void of previous conviviality [Straughan & Bissell 2022], for university students temporary detachment brought the chance to take a step back from Campus sexual culture, reflect on one's sexuality, set conscious boundaries and revisit questions of consent [Blum et al. 2023].

Performing art settings were among the most visible fields in which those tactile topologies were being reconfigured – re-negotiated, resisted, re-created – at the intersections of health risks, political decisions, artistic agendas, economic necessities, social conventions. And here, again, losing touch and feelings of detachment had their own meanings. While aesthetic and social spaces that performing art settings create have the potential of enabling participants to lose touch with the familiar in favour of alternative propositions and new experiences, they also tend to rely on physical forms of co-presence. So, while detachment itself cannot be called alien to performing arts settings, the ways in which changing *tactile topographies* challenged known relationships between losing touch and taking place will be of concern in this issue.

In their (pre-pandemic) anthropological exploration of the concept of detachment, Candea et al. [2017: 1] have emphasised that detachment bears social, political, and ethical relevance in many contexts and stands in complex and multiple relationships with relationality and engagement. The presented articles further these trains of thought, as they demonstrate through ethnographic evidence how "losing touch" in its different shapes gives processes of "taking place" new directions and, sometimes, demands new definitions of them. Candea et al. [2017: 23] argue further that detachment can both appear as a (moral) ideology and as a practice (accessible to ethnographic research). The articles of this issue mostly address moral ideologies and practices of detachment at their intersection with the political and the artistic and in conversation with international, state agendas or local governance.

Starting from this point of departure, "losing touch" and the subsequent sense of detachment in the following articles have more than one flooring; they appear as the liminal quality of art-spaces to imagine otherwise and beyond the post-imperial canon (Soganci and Evangelou; Wadle), they enter the stage in response to emotional and ethical desperation to untie the self from an enforced, unwanted national identity (Glaskovskaya), they come up in the desire to question cultural traditions and artistic conventions (Leizoala; Muktupāvela and Laķe); and they conceive themselves as creative challenges to move from self-centred artwork to artwork that engages social imaginaries.

The authors of this issue are interested in gaining empirical, ethnographic insights into these moments and sites, in which such re-definitions occur. The question that moves them is thus concerned with what happens, when processes of "taking place" and "losing touch" concur and interact with one another, what definitions of "taking place" and "losing touch" are at work in their given field sites, and how they change over time.

Another term that comes to help in locating the contributions of this issue, is the notion of "fringes". Redefining "fringes" for the purpose of this issue allows us

to make sense of the complex situatedness of the performative art settings – geo-politically, historically, artistically, and in relation to other events.

Europe's Fringes beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic

While the COVID-19 pandemic is a starting point for our reflection in this special issue and while this issue proposes to think of it as a significant, global paradigm shift for social experiences of the spatial as mentioned earlier, it is yet important to understand that the narratives of the articles in this journal span well beyond the pandemic. And although the COVID-19 pandemic appears in all the works, it is not necessarily the single challenge or most central one in the process of place-making that the authors describe in their papers.

In the geo-political context of the articles in this issue, all authors describe experiences of substantial vulnerability, precariousness, struggle and acquired resilience as a given for their events well before and still after the global health crisis. In fact, the spatial tensions and frictions at the crevices of which the described performing arts settings discussed in this issue take place are multi-layered and reach into conflict-ridden pasts, geo-politically unstable presents, and struggled-over futures. They take us to histories of war and colonialization which speak about violence, loss of home, separation, trauma, and guilt at what we loosely term Europe's fringes. The notion of fringes carves out a new shade in the anthropological colour palette theorizing peripheralities. Concepts that address experiences of peripherality and remoteness are manifold in anthropology, a discipline, to which the marginal has always been at the centre of concern. In their pre-pandemic compilation of articles, Saxer and Andersson prophetically drew attention to "the return of remoteness" in a new shape and set sails to

> "*explore the current re-emergence and mobilization around remoteness as a structuring device, as political idiom, as resource and as a form of practice at a time of intense yet imperiled 'globalisation'*" [Saxer and Andersson 2019:2].

Saxer and Andersson see themselves among others in continuity with Edwin Ardener's work [2012], which describes remoteness as a long-distance relationship marked by inequality and the vulnerability of one group to the continuous, often failing "innovations" of the other. At the heart of their anthropological inquiry stands the intersection between remoteness and power in the context of changing world "disorders": the active production of remoteness, among others through the disorganization of economic and infrastructural connectivities. These (world) politics of remoteness, of rendering remote bear significance also for the character of performing arts settings in the articles of this special issue: they set the frameworks for creative interventions and their life-courses. Questions of transnational power

relations are implicit to each of the discussions of the making of performing art settings, and transcend the transnational event of the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, there is more to performing art settings and those who make them than the forces that they are exposed to. We see these settings themselves as forces of connection and disconnection and are particularly interested in the agency that these settings/events and the individuals or groups engaged in their production (in what international relations jargon likes to describe as parts of "soft power") can claim for themselves.

Fringes as a proposition for further anthropologically exploring aspects of peripherality puts the focus on the realm of cultural productions and performative arts and their specific experiences of remoteness, which since the global pandemic through the paradigm of the "remote" gained new, additional layers of meaning. Therefore, the term "fringes" not only alludes to a geo-political sense of remoteness of the locations, in which the papers are situated, but also refers to the concept of a cultural event that happens non-juried in a semi-official realm, at the fringe of a bigger, more official and more institutionalized event. This particular fringe-ness hence includes artistic and entrepreneurial innovations at the semi-policed or non-guarded outskirts of a main event.

This definition is based on the circumstances that gave Edinburgh Fringe Festival its name, when it emerged in 1947 as unofficial event alongside the tightly curated, invitation-only Edinburgh International Festival:

> "*In that first year eight theatre troupes who had not been invited to perform arrived on the scene, arranged a performance space, and put on their shows during the run of the official festival. Their efforts were fruitful, and the following year even more unofficial participants were present. Because they operated within venues on the margins of the official festival, the alternative scene became known as the Fringe (later Edinburgh Festival Fringe)*" [Encyclopedia Britannica].

The name reappears with a different weight and meaning in the contribution by Nihal Soganci and Ellada Evangelou: they discuss the making of Buffer Fringe Festival, an art festival that takes place at the fringes of the post-conflict buffer zone of divided Cyprus, around the famous border crossing of Ledra Palace Hotel. With "fringe(s)", we hence embrace an ethnographically arising notion from within the performing arts that serves us as a conceptual, introductory anchorage for exploring positionalities and hegemonies in the different ethnographic contexts that follow in this issue. Part of this interest is in the methodologies and techniques through which such agency may be expressed and performed in positionalities that are held together by historically evolved configurations of struggle and vulnerability. This interest has been sparked by anthropological work on "Peripheral Methodologies" [Martinez,

Di Puppo & Fredrikson 2021], which has drawn attention to peripherality as a method of thought and experience, exploring the potential of seeking insight beyond knowing and conventional consciousness. Inspired by this approach, we are open to the idea that inhabiting the fringes and creating them may also demand peripheral (or fringe) methodologies that need different forms of researcher engagement to grasp them, including the body, internal monologues, or collaborative methods.

There are significant parallels between the concept of the fringe and what cultural theoretician and artist Svetlana Boym [2017] described as "the logic of edginess". In Boym's writing, edginess comes with an activist proposition for creative communities on the margins.[1] The "logic of edginess" is part of her off-modern project, in which she called for a focus on "alternative solidarities between cultures that often circumscribe the center, creating a broad margin for peripheral scenographies" [Boym: 6]. What our concept of the fringe and the logic of edginess have in common, is recognizing the possibility of a unique, vulnerable positionality that is not necessarily marginal, but that is based on inhabiting the margins (or fringes), deliberately, self-standingly and creatively. Svetlana Boym explained this as follows:

> "*The logic of edginess (..) exposes wounds, scars, cuts, ruins, the afterimage of touch. (..) The off-modern edges aren't sites of marginality but those broad margins where one could try to live deliberately, against all odds, in the age of shrinking space and resources and forever accelerating rhythms. To be edgy, then, could also mean avoiding the logic of the cutting edge, even if the temptation is great. Edginess takes time*" [Boym 2017: 26].

With the practice of dwelling in these margins or fringes, performing arts events can relate, resist, and create alternative visions to a dominant perspective. If Boym called such a dominant perspective the "cutting edge", following the metaphor of the fringe in this issue, we can think of this dominant perspective as fluctuating hegemonial main events that take the center stage at the time, and around which the fringes emerge, and from which they, eventually, emancipate, or which they can even fully replace.

When it comes to these "main events" along the fringes of which the performative art settings that we discuss are taking place (and losing touch), we suggest a broader definition of the term: while they can simply refer to an authorised cultural event that takes the mainstage to a less formally accepted one, they can also refer to a mainstream discourse within a community of performance art professionals (like the concept of "presence" in Latvian theatre as discussed by Rūta Muktupāvela's and

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[1] Edginess is a concept that also appears in the previously mentioned work on remoteness by Saxer and Andersson, who call remoteness "edgy" to highlight it as a negotiated process rather than spatial condition [2019: 4].

Anda Laķe's text), at the margins of which new, hybrid art forms are emerging. Those "main events" can also be binational diplomatic relationships and funding landscapes (like the German-Polish ones, about which Hannah Wadle writes in her article) at the fringes of which the cultural festival takes place. At the same time, main events, as we understand them in relation to the "fringes", can also refer to political urgencies that take the societal main stage. These are events endowed with a centralising force that relocates existing performing arts events to become marginal or finding themselves in relational position to a newly emerged central event of global impact. Alexandra Glaskovskaya's work on the Irish Festival dance community in Russia courageously describes the contrasting experiences of approximation and detachment while being at the shifting fringes of two major world-political emergencies – the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Russian War aggression on Ukraine.

As indicated above, the kind of fringe that we are referring to has more to itself than peculiar architectures within the margins – it has the capacity to become something in and of its own right, independent and meaningful on its own: like Edinburgh Fringe Festival that evolved thanks to its exceptional format globally as *the* place to perform for comedians and as *the* place to attend cutting-edge comedy for audiences, we can observe a similar tendency for the performing arts events that are discussed by our authors. Being more than spin-offs, counter-events or aspiring simulacrums, the settings at the fringes are seekers of new relationalities, ideas of community, memory, and senses of place and self: seekers of new forms of reconciliation on Cyprus, seekers of a different space of dialogue in post-Prussian Mazury, seekers of a bearable sense of personhood and community in Russia-at-War, seekers of new forms of being-there-together in (post-)COVID-19 theatre, seekers of new spaces of knowledge creation between the arts and the social sciences. While they might emerge from different kinds of marginalizing relationalities or repeatedly experience those, they strongly speak in their own voice and make propositions that stand on their own feet.

Intersections: Performing Arts, Anthropology and Taking Place

Without this being the condition for participating in this publication, most of the authors share a proximity to their research subject and happen to be themselves involved in producing performing arts settings in one way or the other. Their ethnographic fields, cultural activisms, and transnational identities can be pictured to lie, to return to this earlier used image, on a möbius strip [cf. Ana 2023]. This makes the resulting special issue one with exceptional insights that stem from critical engagement with theory and analytical scrutiny on research data, and from personal experience, practical knowledge and a genuine concern with transformative creating arts settings. The voices that this issue collates bridge the often-remote worlds of

academic debates and the knowledge exchange of practitioners. They prove that we can create an intellectually engaging, yet honest, down-to-earth conversation that includes both perspectives and fruitfully marries them, fulfilling the promise of novelty for readers with expertise in either of those perspectives.

If we have previously noted a growing interest in anthropologically understanding performing arts settings, there has also been an increasing interpolation/ cross-fertilization between the arts and the social sciences more broadly speaking and in terms of interdisciplinary/ intersectional knowledge exchange. I am referring here specifically to the debates and new practices that were initiated in social anthropology, the subject tradition I am embedded in and from which I am writing. For some time now, art practitioners have grown their interest in methods, questions and theoretical groundings that social scientists, for instance social anthropologists and ethnographers, are using to critically address contemporary issues [cf. Foster 1996]. Meanwhile anthropologists have also started actively engaging with new possibilities that the arts and creative art settings have opened for anthropological knowledge creation, with new forms of collaboration, and models of engagement with the social [cf. Schneider and Wright 2013; Lehrer 2013; D'Onofrio 2017; Laborde 2018; Sjoberg 2018; Rakowski 2019].

If, not long ago, cultural production and the curation of arts settings had been distant fields to social anthropologists, present tendencies suggest strong intersections that are likely to deepen and possibly even formalize in the future [Lehrer & Meng 2015; Sansi 2019; von Oswald and Tinius 2020]. Drawn to the (performing) arts through their social transformative potential and their deeply experimental, exploratory character, social anthropologists, together with other social scientists, have become involved with them not merely as researchers, but often also as practitioners [Kazubowski-Houston 2010; Kuligowski and Poprawski 2023; Schneider 2017; Auslander et al. 2022]. This issue further pursues the concern that since "getting one's hands dirty" through forms of engaged, practice-oriented research/research-oriented practice, in this case with the arts, has become part of a new professional standard in social anthropology and other social sciences disciplines, it is crucial to establish critical frameworks for it; scholars-practitioners need to thoroughly self-enquire, *how* this is put into practice and what outcomes are to be anticipated.

In their ethnographic and often auto-ethnographic explorations around the making of performing arts settings, the articles of this special issue contribute to emerging frameworks for critical self-inquiry regarding the processes and outcomes of researcher engagement with the arts. In their respective field sites, the authors unpack the complex processes through which festivals, theatre performances, and dance performances come into existence. An important part are their reflections

on different entanglements with the "taking place" of these settings, including their personal entanglements as researchers and, in some cases, researchers-cum-practitioners: dancers, curators, producers. At the same time, experiences of losing touch and detachment shape the authors' research methodologies. A key ingredient that the contributors add to this issue is their vulnerability as involved researchers – either involved in cultural interventions and artistic activities, or involved in shaping ongoing debates with the artistic and cultural production environment. Being vulnerable here means a level of both self-reflection and introspection that reveals intimate thoughts and internal tensions of the author.

Hannah Wadle discusses the politics of taking place around a cross-genre community festival that she is the founder of. It is situated around a former East-Prussian country estate in the Masurian Lake District in Northeast Poland. Through ethnographic observations, she dissects the way, in which state power and international diplomacy intersect with grass roots initiatives in unequal relations, and how she and the festival become engaged for foreign politics. Using the method of internal monologues, she exposes the inner ambiguity about decisions she has made in her long-term field site in the role of an entangled anthropologist. The observed process spans over seven years, including the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Russian aggression on Ukraine, with both events having untypical consequences for the evolving character of the festival.

Exploring Elmārs Seņkovs' digital performance "The Iranian Conference" (a play by Ivan Vyrypaev), Rūta Muktupāvela and Anda Laķe debate the perspectives of digital innovations in drama that took place during the pandemic condition and its physically detached mode. They assess the ground rules of an important concept in international and Latvian theatre, namely the "sense of presence" (*klātbūtnes sajūta*) asking, to what extent it may be compatible or not with new, digital interventions into the theatrical space that risk to detach audiences and actors from the experience of "taking place".

In Alexandra Glaskovskaya's article about the international Festival Irish Dance community and its Russian-national members, we experience the precarious, changing and unpredictable modalities of belonging to a network of dance enthusiasts. Glaskovskaya describes how the pandemic detached dancers physically while pushing the boundaries for inclusion, allowing peripheral dancers to participate digitally. During this time, the dancing body becomes both a tool of participation and an inquiry about it. After Russia's attack on Ukraine, detachment in the Russian Irish dancing scene obtained a different meaning: Between feelings of guilt about dancing during the War, the experience of being excluded from events in the Irish festival dancing network, the fear of state repressions against critical opinions and a crisis about holding the citizenship of an attacking state, detachment now referred

to the imagined community of the nation (and the desire to detach from it), as well as to the actual international network of the dance community (and the sorrow of being excluded).

The Cypriot Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festival of Nicosia and its altered situation during the pandemic is presented by Nihal Soganci and Ellada Evangelou, who are also the curators of the event. The authors introduce their readers to the conflicted context in which the festival takes place, the formerly UN-controlled buffer zone and explain its continuous politicization – as space of governmentality and as liminal, affective and decolonizing space of resistance. While reaching into the difficult pasts of the island, the particular focus of the paper are the pandemic and post-pandemic festival editions. The organisers are in the taxing position of creating an event in a fragile, liminal spot that is subjected to unforeseeable border closures and other political measures. The article discusses the organisers' determination to make the event happen during the COVID-19 Pandemic against these odds and fragilities through methods of spatial detachment and hybrid entanglements. They learnt from this detachment and created a sustainable, solidary post-pandemic festival format that enables its "taking place" consistently and collectively.

Finally, the article on a collaborative arts-based research project develops a set of methods, offers its own approach to the ideas of entanglement and detachment: through the collaboration and knowledge exchange between artists and social scientists, young artists are encouraged to new form of perpetual reflexivity, by means of which they gain more insight into their own social and global entanglements. The social science perspective also helps develop their skill to see themselves and their art from a distance and in the context of the experiences of others.

Entanglement, in the process of creating performing art settings, can thus mean different things – it can mean the ways, in which researchers get involved in a field of relationships and tasks as practitioners in the arts, but also the entanglement of an entire event or community in larger, historical power relationships, political configurations; it can refer to being physically involved in embodied experiences, movements and co-presence; or, it can also refer to entanglement in webs of knowledge exchange. Through their ethnographic elaborations and their cultural analyses, the authors of this issue give further evidence that entanglement need not be the incompatible opposition to detachment, but appears rather as its mutually constitutive partner in what could be called a methodology of taking place. This emerging methodology of taking place takes shape in the articles through the prism of detachment and entanglement. This implies that, as the authors are critically investigating the conditions for creating performance art settings, they draw particular attention to remoteness and proximity, to participation and exclusion, to knowing and doing, to acting and being acted upon. In doing so, they trace the

specific precariousness and vulnerabilities in different configurations of "taking place" during and beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic.

In conclusion to this introduction to the special issue, one point seems to be of particular importance: All articles give vivid evidence of how fruitful the position between practice and research can become – and what kinds of reflections and "reports" are possible when we look deeper into the layers of time and behind the facades of common assumptions and reflect critically about our own positionality and practice in the field. Rather than fetishizing research engagement, this issue's papers normalize it, foregrounding the necessity of establishing a debate on professionalism that includes introspection, scrutiny, and approaches to structure and power. On these grounds, the insights and conclusions made by the authors may find an echo also in the community of practitioners whose bars for accuracy and honesty about practices of making performing arts settings are high. They will thus hopefully flow in different directions and find their paths to different audiences – reaching from the academic community to practitioners in the cultural sector and in the legislative, political sphere.

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BETWEEN APPROPRIATION AND APORIA:
CULTURAL ACTIVISM IN POST-EAST PRUSSIAN POLAND

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Abstract

Following the process of creating a cultural festival around a castle post-East Prussian Poland, this article explores the moral complexities and political pulls within which cultural activism and engaged anthropology take place in this contested area. At the heart of the discussion stands problematising the tendencies of the gradual appropriation of the festival initiative for political trajectories and the transformation of value. The article tells a story that can be read as part of an anthropology of post-WWII and post-Cold War Europe and its lasting traumas and inequalities; it can also be seen within the (engaged) anthropology of future making.

Adopting the concepts of aporia and haunting, the author reflects on her position as the founder of the festival and the evolving internal dialogue between resisting appropriation and facilitating it. In form of an autoethnographic, textual montage she presents her positionality, and participation in this process as anthropologist-cum-activist and German citizen living and working in Poland, proposing the notion of "entangled anthropology" to engage with the dimensions of the moral dilemma.

Keywords: *Engaged Anthropology, Entangled Anthropology, Festival, Performative Heritage, Cultural Activism, Post-East Prussia, German-Polish Relationships, Autoethnographic Montage, Aporia, Gentrification, Appropriation.*

CULTURE
CROSSROADS

Part I
Introduction and methodological considerations

This contribution unpacks the political pulls around a cultural initiative, more precisely a castle festival in Northeast Poland, former East Prussia.[1] It problematises the tendencies of the gradual appropriation of the event for political and economic trajectories. As engaged anthropologist and founder of the festival, I present my positionality and participation in the process, reflecting on my own cultural activism and my evolving internal dialogue between resisting those external pulls and facilitating them. Borrowing from artivist Kathrin Böhm, I am asking myself "[w]hat do I produce and what do I reproduce with the way I work?" [De Waechter 2019: 1] in this particular setting and time.

The article tells a story that can be read fruitfully as an (auto-)ethnography of post-WWII and post-Cold War Central Europe[2] and Poland's late post-socialist *twilight zone* [Buchowski 2019]: with its complex entanglements of patronising forces and moments of (self-)subordination at the peripheries [Rakowski 2017: 95]. It is situated regionally within the specific power-relations that emerge at the "poniemieckie", "post-German" [cf. Kuszyk 2019] or, more precisely, "post-prussian" crossroads of value creation for heritage-making, tourism investment, social research and civic society. It can also be seen within the (engaged) anthropology of future making [cf. Salazar et al. 2017, Kazubowski-Houston and Auslaender 2021] as it spans over roughly ten years, tracing the steps of creating an annual cultural event, which is part of creating a heritage site, a village, a region, future inter-state relations, to only name a few. The cultural activities are inspired by contemporary *artivist* approaches across the globe and specifically by the work of radical constructivist applied art of Michal Kurzwelly at the German-Polish border that created the transnational, civic, imaginative spatialities of Słubfurt and Nowa Amerika.[3] It is

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[1] The identity of the place will be easy to identify for any interested reader as anonymizing it is impossible within the argument. To take some weight off the public exposure the proper names of palace and festival won't be mentioned in headings and the main body of the article.

[2] I follow Michał Buchowski and Hana Cervinkova who use the notion of *Central Europe* arguing that it is "a creation that has acquired a realistic status through articulations in practices and, in consequence, in social relations – interethnic, intergroup, interstate, and interregional" [2015: 3]. My addition of post-WW II and post-Cold War is an emphasis about the origins of entanglements and emotional landscapes that matter in the past-presencing [Macdonald 2012] within my fieldsite.

[3] https://nowa-amerika.eu/manipulate-reality/ (viewed 9.04.2024.)

further an activist ethnography [Juris and Khasnabish 2013] with para-ethnographic edge [Holmes and Marcus 2020: 28] situated in an unlikely social environment that includes political as well as economic, cultural and intellectual elites, against and together with whom it interacts. And lastly, it is an affective, reflexive and entangled ethnography of performing the state and of negotiating citizenship [following Reeves et al. 2013: 11], in that it presents the moral dilemma of a cultural activist and citizen in face of political pressure and privilege.

The story roughly unrolls over the past decade and continues into the present, in which I am authoring this article, and into an imagined future. In fact, my writing stands in direct competition with organisational duties of the actual event. The festival itself is situated around a historical estate in the Masurian Lake District, contemporary Northeast Poland and former East Prussia, but reaches further to the urban centres of Warsaw and Berlin, and not least to Poznań, Poland, where I am based as a university lecturer. In the following I will introduce the reader to the site and the festival, as well as to my own story around and affective involvement with arising dilemmas.

Throughout the text, I am making use of the montage as a representational space that hosts what is otherwise incommensurable [Nielsen 2013 following Deleuze: 2]. In this case, it will be an autobiographical montage that hosts the different voices of the author and their different roles; the anthropologist-cum-producer, the practitioner, observer, activist, academic, citizen. Those montages are a methodological tool to represent experiences of aporia and haunting – two guiding concepts in this article, inspired by Nils Bubandt's [2014] discussion of witch discourses on an Indonesian island and by Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska's [2024] research on post-German materialities, through which I theorise the paradoxical experiences of "taking place" and "losing touch" during my cultural activism in post-German Northeast Poland. Aporia signifies a sense of difficulty and pathlessness when possessing insufficient knowledge or tools to address ambiguities and incompatible paradigms. Haunting highlights the histories of suffering and the weight of living together on their rubbles. Aporia emerges between my research-led intentions of a cultural activism that wants to make space for marginalized communities (and their stories) and of creatng encounters between disjointed social groups, and the gradual appropriation of the cultural initiative, a multi-genre festival, by transnational stakeholders, which involves incorporation into their institutional structures. My research-led trajectory of cultural activism simultaneously opposes and counters this process of appropriation and facilitates it. Thus, aporia here describes a dilemma that evolves within enduring power relationships and unequal interdependencies, politics of value and claims to meaning-making. Confronting this dilemma, I am haunted by the violent pasts of the area and standing on constantly shaking moral grounds.

Next to my academic analysis stand snippets of returning interior dialogues that I have had with myself since the beginning of organising the festival. They add to the phenomenology of my embodied ambivalence. They also tell a story of disjuncture between internal, private expressions and outward manifestations [Irving 2011: 24] and of a vivid two-way knowledge exchange and translation. These snippets also talk about the dilemma of identifying and acting as someone – an anthropologist-cum-cultural-activist – while being read and involved as someone else – an engaged citizen. I call them soliloquies[1], borrowing from the language of drama, because while they represent my *Selbstgespräche* (German for auto-communication), they are performed on the stage of this article to the readership. What both the chosen method and the chosen form of writing allow me to further is an argument about situated and specific odds of producing a performing arts setting as a highly educated, Polish-speaking German national in post-East Prussian Poland. These odds evolve through external pressures, internalised loyalties, and power inequalities, in a situation marked by the seductiveness and responsibility that come with imposed, exceptional privilege.

We owe it to Judith Okely's and Helen Callaway's seminal collection "Anthropology and Autobiography" [1992] [but also others, cf. Hastrup 1992; Bochner and Ellis 2016; Anderson 2006; and most recently: Laviolette and Boskovic 2022] that the academic community of Social Anthropologists have come to recognise autobiographical writing as a powerful, irreplaceable source for knowledge creation. Work such as Kazubowski-Huston's [2011] on her tenuous performance project with Polish youth and Polish Roma communities evidences that specifically for engaged anthropologists, self-reflective, autoethnographic writing is an essential part of a process of professional scrutiny. I hence use personal experience as well as the anthropological analytical tools of my positionality in the field of cultural and heritage activism to self-assess my professional input and to critique processes of appropriating cultural engagement of civic initiatives. This critique must be viewed within the larger contemporary context of the multiple and enduring [Stoler, 2016] national, international and transnational legacies of imperial and colonial forms of engagement – German, Polish and other with the area, Poland's part of former East

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[1] Lat. for single speech, inspired from the Greek concept of the monologue, from which it grew apart over the centuries. I follow the Shakespearian school of using the soliloquy as "a dramatic speech uttered by a single character, usually alone on the stage, either as a confidential disclosure to the audience or in private but audible self-communion. This kind of speech may reveal motives that are hidden from the other characters (..); or unfold a character's inner tensions and doubts (..). The device may also serve comic purposes (..)." In: Baldick, C. (2015). Soliloquy. In: *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved 12 Sep. 2023, from https://www-oxfordreference-com.manchester.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780198708735.001.0001/acref-9780198708735-e-2698

Prussia; as a manifestation of this engagement we may count the area's exploitation over the course of time for military activities[1], recreation[2], investment[3], national identity politics[4]. Some of those aspects will become relevant at a later point.

My positionality in this particular field has become a type of condenser [Kazubowski-Houston 2021] and privileged site of contest over meaning, loyalty, and resources in which I was both acting as well as being acted upon [Jackson 2013: 207], carving out an activist agenda, that was gradually being made to serve other ones.

In this instance, appropriation becomes a relevant concept with which I (self-) critique collaborative processes, showing how they advance structural domination and subordination of communally produced meanings and networks under larger political or economic agendas. Philosopher Eric Hatala Matthes [2016] draws attention to the ironic double bind between critiques of cultural appropriation and essentialist thought, warning about their dangerous proximity. He argues that

> "*persons who make claims objecting to cultural appropriation predicated on essentialist distinctions between insiders and outsiders risk causing harms of a similar kind to the appropriations to which they are objecting*" [Matthes 2016: 346].

Much of the previously introduced experience of aporia is linked to the difficult navigation between hopes for a politics of representation and for practices of cooperation and fears about mechanisms of essentialisation and domination. The question of appropriation arises when a dominant semiotic and structural framework is imposed onto a cultural initiative, which is being framed as "German-Polish" and thereby starts contributing to a particular historical genealogy of value creation. This frame emerges as an essentialising division to the project team and organisation that comes with its own historical hauntings. Appropriation secondly happens through such collaborations within the project that fix certain groups in certain places – with the effect that existing power-inequalities and essentialisations of the "other" risk to be reproduced and affirmed – but could also be addressed and actively challenged.

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[1] Area is full of military pasts and presents, including Prussian fortresses, Nazi-bunkers, and contemporary NATO facilities.

[2] The area was developed as a domestic tourism destination in East Prussia and, later in the People's Republic of Poland this development was taken up again this development continuing into the present.

[3] Companies and individuals from outside the region have been buying up land and property in the area since this was possible after 1990.

[4] The area has been a contested territory for symbolic national identity politics between Germany and Poland, with one of the iconic myths being the battles of Grunwald/Tannenberg.

The Castle, the village, former East Prussia: a peripheral, chronotopian festival setting

If we approach the festival setting from the bird's eye view, we zoom into the northernmost corner of the Masurian Lake District, Northeast Poland, to see a small dot of a village on a peninsula, surrounded by lakes and forest. The closest three small towns are each half an hour's drive away. Oblast Kaliningrad is in mobile phone roaming distance. If we zoom in some more, we can see the large, temporarily covered red roof of a historical castle, a bunch of residential buildings, a larger pleasure port, and some ongoing building works. The biggest actor here is the international investor company who owns most of the village and is investing millions of Zloty into the development of the village from a seasonal tourism resort to an all-year-round modern resort for regular tourists, sailors and digital nomads. Other actors are: the permanent residents and homeowners of the village, around twenty-five households of around seventy individuals, former state farm worker families, who are mostly pensioners or employed in tourism. And there is the owner of the deteriorated historical castle, a Polish-German heritage foundation, together with a loosely affiliated cluster of heritage activists, activist groups, and state representatives. With the festival we are in the middle of a huge building site of futures; time, place, and community are being turned upside down and in-the-making: one could say a peripheral place [Adener 1987, 2012], in which the utopias brought there by outsiders and their ruins tend to dominate over the local ones; and a chronotope [Bakhtin 1981], in which time and space condense and overlap.

The festival itself takes place around the castle and within its evolving socio-political configurations. These are inseparable from past frictions, violence and tears. A short glimpse into the history of the site betrays the torn and traumatic past of the whole region and the to-and-fro between German and Polish state agendas. The castle was constructed by a family of East Prussian landowners, who lived and ruled over their extensive landed estate and the people working there for around 500 years, until World War II [Schabe and Wadle 2017: 153]. As a result of Nazi Germany's brutal activities in World War II, East Prussia as one of several previous Eastern German territories was no longer part of post-1945 Germany. The region was subsequently divided between the national territory of the People's Republic of Poland (part of today's voivodeship Warmia and Masuria) and Soviet Russia (enclave of Kaliningrad, former Königsberg). Only a few years after aggressive Germanisation politics, murderous terror against large numbers of individuals from targeted minorities[1], and the military colonisa-

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[1] Jewish individuals [Williams 2023], Sinti and Romani individuals [Rosenhaft 2023], individuals with disabilities (cf. [Topp et al. 2008]).

tion[1] of the region through the Nazis, East Prussia underwent a process of radical Polonisation following Soviet guidelines, wiping out previous memories loosely associated as "German": it was renamed as so-called "regained territories" of the Polish State and recolonised with displaced people from the former Polish East and other parts of the war-shattered country, and, later, with agricultural workers and tourists[2]. This process took place after forced mass migration of the local populations of fourteen million individuals.[3] In the process of re-colonisation, the castle became Polish state property and was used to fulfil an array of communal purposes for the socialist State.[4] As we will see, the echoes of these violent histories, the state trajectories that facilitated them, and the diplomatic long-term dilemmas and shades of guilt and taboo they brought along with them reappear in the configurations for the production of the festival, in heritage activism discourses and in my own experience of doubt and disjuncture.

From the 1980s onward, with the collapse of Socialism and the ensuing political transformation in Poland and Central and Eastern Europe, there was a prolonged period during which ownership of the building changed hands multiple times. During this time, there were various considerations regarding the potential repurposing of the building for both commercial and non-commercial projects. In the mid-2000s, the deteriorated building was taken custody of by a Polish-German heritage foundation, its current owner. Since then, the building has become a heritage-site-in-the-making and palace-in-progress [cf. Schabe and Wadle 2017, Wadle 2020]. Different civic

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[1] This military colonisation concerns specifically the area around the festival grounds. In this area, Adolf Hitler had an outpost of the Nazi government built to plan and execute the attack on Russia/ Soviet Union. Decisions taken here, also concerned the Holocaust and the destruction of Warsaw; at the centre of the colony, there was his headquarter, the bunker settlement "Wolf's Lair", and in the surroundings were outposts of different governmental departments and military divisions. Hitler and his entire governmental staff were stationed in the area between 1941 and 1944 [Neumärker, Conrad, Woywodt 2012].

[2] New historical narratives about this process have been a project of Polish and international historians in the past decade. An example of this is the edited volume "'Ziemie odzyskane'. W poszukiwaniu nowych narracji'" ("Regained Territories". In search of new narrations), edited by Kledzik, Michalskiego and Praczyk [2018].

[3] Towards the end of the War and in the years after, fourteen million individuals from East Prussia (mostly those who identified as ethnic German and ethnic Masures) and millions of individuals from former Eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic (people from today's Lithuania, Belarus, deportees from Siberia and, notably individuals from Ukraine – here through the government order of the Akcja Wisła) were forcibly displaced. Driven out of their homes, by armies, partisans, state order, or the ethnic violence of their neighbours, they undertook often deadly journeys of seeking shelter within the new boundaries of their national states, Germany or Poland (cf. [Hryciuk and Siekiewicz 2009], [Kossert 2020], [Urban 2004]).

[4] Such as kindergarten, headquarters of state farm, sewing studio, holiday camp, canteen and others.

German and Polish-German heritage and cultural initiatives have emerged around the castle, competing over or collaborating for its uncertain futures. The limbo and the contested futures are some of the reasons for the festival to happen: it has become part of the process of place-making – a space for dialogue that holds its own fluid agency.

The Festival Opening

While the history of the festival will be told throughout the article, let me provide some initial information about the event as it may be described at present. The festival is a public event over roughly a week in August that thanks to public funding[1], private donations[2], and volunteer work[3] has been free of charge since its beginning. It is a multi-stakeholder event that became mostly docked onto the German-Polish heritage/ cultural activism paradigm; it is currently mainly affiliated with a German NGO that is devoted to the heritage of the palace, a Polish regional partner organisation[4], and with the Anthropology department of the Polish university I am employed at[5]. Other involved parties are German diplomatic representatives in Poland. The assemblage of stakeholders as well as of funding arrangements have been part of the evolution of my concerns and evolving aporia – internal contradictions – along the way of organizing the festival, as shall be explored later on.

The programme includes art workshops, public masterclasses and guided tours of the castle in the daytime and one signature stage event per evening. There have also been art exhibitions and art residencies. The festival is interdisciplinary and held together by an annual motto that inspires each single element. Those mottos take a playful approach to critically commenting on local developments, subtly evoking regional histories, and gently addressing global concerns in the festival space. The festival opening is the moment to introduce the motto to the onsite, live audience.[6] This is where I want to take you next.

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[1] A binational German-Polish foundation and cultural funds of German diplomatic representations – which will be discussed in more detail later.

[2] Mostly membership fees of the German partner NGO, individual donations of members of the NGO, individual former festival visitors.

[3] Members of the partner NGOs, participants of the international volunteers' programme, student interns from a Polish university, local and international friends and family members of the organizer team, the author of this article.

[4] The Polish partner organisation focuses on community and arts projects around historical memory and regional identities.

[5] Apart from me, a number of students and some of my colleagues became involved since I started working in that university department.

[6] Some of the mottos were: "Welcome to the Playground", "Summer of Windows", "Clouds", "Hospitality", most recently "Circles, Cycles, Bubbles".

Here we are at the opening ceremony of the seventh festival edition of 2022 around the deteriorated palace in a small village-cum-tourism resort in the Masurian Lake District. Just like in the past few years, the Festival Organising Committee, me and the three other members, are waiting to perform the opening essay together, in Polish and German language[1]: this year, our essay introduces the theme of *hospitality*.[2] We are: a long-term castle restoration activist and chair of the formal organiser of the festival – a German NGO; the only permanent on-site employee at the castle – a multi-lingual MA graduate; a local A-level student who works as part-time summer visitor guide, and me, anthropologist and cultural activist. Our ages range from 19 to 73.

This year, there is a spontaneously announced and prestigious addition to the festival opening that we learn about briefly before the event: before it is our turn, one of our previous special guests, a diplomatic representative of the German Federal Republic in Poland, heads up to the microphone for the opening address in German and Polish: in a cordial and supportive speech, they praise the initiative and achievements of the event, the high level of engagement, the spirit of the festival, and the contribution to the manifold activities around the heritage activism and revitalisation of the castle. The address finishes with a warm welcome to the special guests that are attending this year: a representative of the German media, a German clergyman, a member of the Bundestag, family members of former East Prussian palace owners are among the mentioned.

Apart from this illustrious group, many chairs remain empty this year and the student photographers are trying their best to show a crowd, where there is none. They capture a few members of the heritage association, some sporadic previous visitors from the region, my own family, and festival performers for the following days, as well as volunteers – mostly my anthropology students, offering locally-made cakes and taking photographs. Who is missing are people from the village, from the port, from the nearby towns. The local television has arrived late to stream the event. "Gladly so," I think to myself, and further: "something is off here. This is not where our festival was supposed to go. The party has gone out of control." Or maybe rather: it has started to gain uncanny privilege and be controlled by stakeholders that were not planned for controlling it.

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[1] The speech is based on an essay that I wrote and published each year as the festival director. It explores the festival motto in relation to local and global events. I tended to use these mottos and related essays as invitations for critical observation of what is happening around the palace and as a tool for shaping the discourses on it.

[2] The speech touches, among others, upon migration from war-torn Ukraine, the Humanitarian Crisis at the Polish Belarussian Border, tourism and gentrification in the Masurian Lake District and forced migrations in the area during World War II.

The next day I meet my volunteer PR-team in agony. Surprised by the opening address of the German diplomate, they quickly posted a Social Media story in which they misspelled the name of the diplomate and their exact function. A follow-up apology was posted, but the student team remains divided over the incident. In a subsequent volunteer team gathering I try to clarify the roots of this mishap, and the mismatch of expectations that we as a team of volunteers had been thrown into. I tell them something like: "*Remember that at present we are a low-budget, non-profit festival run by you interns and volunteers, which is suddenly required to provide professional services on the standards of international diplomacy and media – of course without receiving payment for them, and without much notice about the appearance of those high-level attendees.*"

The opening and the subsequent incidents are revealing about the internal dissonances of this event: the infrastructures within which the event is organised and the shape it is expected to take given these conditions. It also hints at the different visions and purposes that its varying protagonists have allocated to the festival over time – me being one of them. These reach from an integrational, inclusive community festival, to an event from heritage activists for heritage activists, to a showcase lobbying event for an (inter)national group of stakeholders. In-between those, as we can see, are emergent incompatibilities and diverging priorities.

Soliloquy (1/4)

In a narrow kitchen in Jeżyce, Poznań, around noon in February

H. arrives from the office, talking to herself, wrapped in a blanket waist-down to brew coffee. In the backdrop we softly hear the end of Chemical Brothers' "Out of Control"[1] then the advertisement jingle of the streaming platform.

Why do you insist the festival has gone out of control? What could possibly be the issue with organising a cultural festival in the quiet, remote Masurian Lake District in the Northeast of Poland? Apart from the weather, power supply and acquiring the necessary funds? Nobody is going to prison for anything here, no police to cut the power and chase the audience out, no state power to hold you back violently, nothing the like. It is not even a political event.

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[1] *We're out of control/ Out of control/ Out of control/ Out of control/ Out of control/ Sometimes I feel that I'm misunderstood/ The river's runnin' deep right through my blood/ Your naked body's lying on the ground/ You always get me up when I'm down*
Chemical Brothers [Out of Control 1999].

Maybe I am putting it wrongly – the party has not gone out of control, it has gone into control. The big deal is not that the state is chasing us, it is rather the opposite: instead of cutting us the power the state is more likely to be bringing us the power; instead of carrying and chasing us away, they are joining us, starting to attend and populate the event; instead of exercising violence to control us, they are affording us privilege and increasing access to resources. This scares me.

Why complain about this, why not just shut up and enjoy?

Possibly you are right, I should not, I should just carry on, no big problem, right? But something got out of control here; this party was never meant to belong to any state and it was not meant to become the mingling grounds for any special guests. And I never wanted my activities to be praised by any representative of the state. Because wouldn't that really mean that I did them on behalf of my state – and when it comes down to it – that they own me?

Hear yourself talking – a spoilt German white kid! Somebody you didn't want to have there, stormed your party and you offered them drinks and accepted their gifts, because you didn't really know how to deal with the privilege you obtained. I get it. You thought it was all part of the inclusivity agenda, but it came at the cost of others: while you were receiving a bit more funding and occasional invitations to your embassy, others got the side effects of feeling out of place at the party in their own village. It seemed no longer for them, but for a crowd who wore fancy clothes, looked down at the present of the village and fathomed about its future.

Ouch, that hurt! Did you know things could be a lot worse, if I didn't speak up, rejected offers, found new allies? But I agree, essentially you are right. But why did they want this very party, wasn't there enough space for everyone to start an event, really, they could have had their own.

Yes, I wonder why. No, but really, you have to stop being so naïve.

Part II
H. and the Castle: The Anthropologist returns

I came to read Franz Kafka's "The Castle" [1998, 1926] relatively late in life, in fact, I suppose too late to take it as a serious warning about the seductive force that castles exercise over us and the relations of power that reside in castles, waiting to possess us. But when I finally did read it, I was personally alarmed. To most readers, Kafka's unfinished novel about the land surveyor K., who arrives in the village to be increasingly and irrevocably drawn to the castle upon the hill, the assumed site of power, and attracted to everyone who is connected to it, is meaningful in metaphorical ways, to me it had a literal analogy. In many ways, it narrates the story of my years of fieldwork and field engagement in the village in Northeast Poland.

H., the fieldworker, first arrives in the village with the castle for a year of ethnographic fieldwork that she will base her PhD thesis on.[1] As she researches the different angles of the village and of tourism in the area, she meets most of the heritage activists during her observations.[2] In the first and second summer, she accompanies and interviews them. When the last tourists go, she stays in the village. She parks her white VW with the German number plate that betrays some of her identity in the snow. Then she walks from house to house to learn about life in the village, drinks tea, peels potatoes, and finally moves in with an elderly couple, who have a vacancy. Sometimes she asks people about the castle, too. They have many stories from their younger years about the castle – of living there, working there, first kisses and kindergarten[3] – but nobody in the village really knows what's going on up there now. They rely on gossip and on the sparse reports that the local newspaper is publishing.

When people ask H., if she is involved with the castle people, she negates firmly. No, she says, she is an Anthropologist from Germany doing a PhD in the UK, she is not part of the castle people, she is just interested in the castle as part of the village.

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[1] This dates not long after the financial crisis and some time before Brexit, Covid, Putin's War and Charles the Second.

[2] In the summer she learns the skills of tourism: sailing Mazury on the lakes, East Prussia on the bike, then takes a chair and sits down in front of the castle, watching people come and go, comment, complain to the on-site castle employee, and donate or withhold donations.

[3] Since starting cultural activism around the castle, apart from my own ethnographic research, some of the palace stories from post-1945 have been documented in a recent oral history-storytelling project by a German-speaking writer in collaboration with a transnationally acting, Germany-based museum curator. The larger project was funded by public sources and also included interviews with palace activists, including myself.

She may be German, but she did not intend to come here as a German for the castle's sake. Still, they continue asking her: "*So, H., what's new with the castle, do you know anything?*" In the end, doesn't she understand the castle people and their language? And wouldn't it be more obvious, yes, natural, to align with the castle people, rather than with the villagers? She shares whatever news about the castle pass her way of research and tries to facilitate encounters between informants from the village and from around the castle. She sticks with the villagers. But don't castles always manage to take what they think is theirs, in the end?

After graduation, she returns to the village for a bit.[1] "*We would have helped you defend the thesis with the pitchfork*", the people in the village say and hug her, kisses on cheeks, she is "*nasza*" (pl. "ours"). H. doesn't return with a plan as most people do when they come back anywhere. Rather with a vague wish to share, discuss and evolve her research findings in one way or another. This will be a new beginning for H., the anthropologist, the beginning of H., the anthropologist-producer, cultural activist. It will also be another beginning, an unanticipated one – the beginning of H., the German, who *nolens-volens* is affiliated with the castle people.

Returns to Masuria: Entangled Anthropologist

Here is a challenge many of you will have faced before me: How to address, maybe even critique something that is not yet set in stone – a future that is only lurking at the horizon, unfixed, mouldable, not only for others, but for you, too? How can the interventionist anthropology of the future that Salazar et al. [2017] call for look in the practice of our own fields?

"*Engaged anthropology responds to questions about the responsibilities of anthropologists to their informants and the desire to address contemporary problems in our work. It differs from other anthropological projects in its recognition that anthropologists have more to contribute to the solution of these problems than just their texts.*" [Kirsch 2018: 230] writes Stuart Kirsch in the conclusion of his book "Engaged Anthropology", in which he summarizes the ambiguous findings of getting involved in local politics as an anthropologist.

I shared Kirsch's sentiments after I had made my point and argued against ongoing heritage politics in my thesis and in articles, but was struggling to communicate them to my field contacts. In my critiques, I had addressed the exclusiveness of the

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[1] For matters of precision: In summer 2015 I stayed a month in the folklore museum of a nearby town and found a very supportive environment there. I also visited the family in the small village of around 30 families, where I had spent much of my time during fieldwork between 2010–11. And I spoke to activists around the historical estate of the village – about the property situation, the renovation plans and about what was going on in the often highly entangled German-Polish heritage project.

heritage project, and the pre-1945 centric historical perspective. Instead, I wanted local histories to become part of the big story about the palace, the castle community to be evolving through shared experiences and encounters, local residents to have a permanent foot in the door and co-own the process of palace-making, the castle to be an inclusive transnational process without dominant sides. I wished for what Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston and Mark Auslaender have called "*a dramaturgy that forges connections between multiple and disparate imaginings of the future*" [2021: 14], the core idea to an anthropology of the future in their edited volume "In Search of Lost Futures". When I offered to present a tailored report of my observations, insights, and suggestions to the palace owner, the transnational heritage foundation, they had not been interested in my proposition.

Therefore, the longer I thought about it, the clearer it became to me that the most obvious person to address all those critiques onsite rather than through writing or even reports, the one who had the knowledge and privilege to do so was I[1]. But what are your tools, when you decide to get your hands dirty and turn some soil? Pink and Salazar [2017: 19–20] and Kazubowski-Houston and Auslaender [2021: 8] suggest that techniques such as creative arts, digital technologies and participatory and improvisational strategies will be enabling for anthropologists to engage with futures. Yet, they are no ready-to-go-recipes with certain outcomes nor a comprehensive list.

All forms of (future) engagement have their rationale and should be individually weighed up against one another. In questions of failure no single one version is riskier than the other, and the paradigm of contrasting "engaged" and "non-engaged" anthropology is unhelpful, all anthropology is engaged: each form brings its own risks, and, to remind us of a common truth, whichever way we decide to act, we are acting, we are doing, creating, and risking something. As a working term to challenge the engaged and non-engaged paradigm in my case, I propose the notion of entangled anthropology – it well reflects my experience of getting actively and consciously involved in long-term processes in the field – as a professional and often also as an individual.

Hacking the Narrative

In 2017, in a cloak-and-dagger operation, I put up a poster exhibition at the castle, on which I had worked for the past two years, assembling materials, researching, copy writing, illustrating. The exhibition contained 15 illustrated posters in Polish and German and was also available online and as a brochure. It was called "Chronicler

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[1] I spoke both languages, had contacts and access to all communities, had thought it through for the past years, was angry about how things were going and wished to change them.

of our Dreams" and told post-War histories of the castle, acknowledging and valuing the lived histories of residents, workers, and summer visitors in the "People's Palace" that was created by the new socialist regime after WWII.[1] The post-War history of the castle, first in the People's Republic of Poland and later in the Republic of Poland, was a period usually summed up by the German, and often also Polish heritage activists in one sentence: as a time, during which the castle was rapidly decaying, until, so the further course of the narrative, it was rescued, last minute before final decay, by the binational heritage foundation. There was usually no mention of everyday life in and around the castle since the village had become Polish after the War; unsurprisingly so, with the former castle village then being a rural socialist ideological project that evolved in the crevices of Post- and Cold War politics of trauma, taboo, historical amnesia, at the fissures of what Andrzej Leder [2014] calls "Sleepwalking the Revolution". The meaning the palace and the village had earned for post-War and current residents was absent in the historical discourse about the emerging heritage site. This attitude also emerged from a conservationist perspective, from which socialism had provenly been an epoch of destruction and decay for many historical monuments.

While many of my colleagues in Poland were and are working on countering a climate of historical amnesia regarding the times before 1945 in the area[2], my first post-fieldwork activities hence concerned countering the devaluation and ignorance of social life in the area since the end of World War II. This commitment was also

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[1] Following an initial invitation to prepare the exhibition, the opening had continuously gotten delayed because the person who had invited me, had subsequently lost access to the castle themselves due to a discord with the heritage foundation. With growing uncertainty whether I would receive the permission, I was following the contemporary paradigm of "hacking place". The website with the digital exhibition that I had built for the purpose was up before the physical exhibition – as a backup plan, if the public event was cancelled by the owner. I was able to gain the permissions last minute and organise an exhibition opening with a guided tour through the "people's castle".

[2] To add to the complexity of the setting it must be said that the history of the area as part of East Prussia also remained strongly marginalised on the level of history politics in Poland. After decades of socialist state pedagogies of vilification of all German and all gentry, a momentum of rediscovering and acknowledging the multi-ethnic and transnational character of the area started with regional movements in the 1990s. The re-valuation of the German-built (often gentry) heritage started as a subversive project with transnational co-operations already since the 1970s [Lewandowska 2014]. However, during their lasting governance, the conservative PIS government dimmed the volume of all those regional and transnational initiatives through public discourse and funding politics. To this day Polish and transnational cultural activists, scholars, and writers are putting in much effort and courage to unpack the complexities of the East Prussian past in their national discourse.

inspired by the work of German and Polish geographers and sociologists[1] on spatial appropriation and home-making among the multi-ethnic post-war populations in Masuria [Mai (Ed.) 2001], by work on East-Elbian "palaces without masters" [Forbrich 2008], and by the groundbreaking work on re-discovering local identities beyond historical ideologies that was forged by the organization Borussia[2] in Olsztyn. It is important to mention that I was not alone in wanting to contribute to re-narrations of place at the time: since I started my activities a new wave of research, writing and artistic activities on these post-war/ post-German experiences and processes of appropriation has been growing – including the work of Borkowska [cf. 2011], Zborowska [cf. 2019], Ćwiek-Rogalska [cf. 2024], but also in the literary work of Kuszyk [2019] and the artistic work of Żmijewska [2020]. I hence believed that if this was becoming a place that claimed to be "shared Polish-German and European heritage" as it was often repeated, it needed to be based on all the different stories that various people and groups identified with, and the evolving master narrative needed to be stretched and expanded.

After the exhibition opening in May 2017 and throughout the summer, hundreds of visitors came to read about the recent past of the palace, a time many of them had memories of and identified with. This first year finished with the publication of my exhibition on the website of the German-Polish heritage foundation. A few months later, I was invited to contribute the story to the anniversary volume of the German-Polish heritage foundation: another person had withdrawn their planned contribution. That way, the narrative about the socialist and post-socialist people's history of the palace made it into the transnational heritage discourse in a printed form.

Soliloquy (2/4)

H. cycling back from Morasko Campus in Poznań through Kurpińskiego Street, late April afternoon. The last sunlight is illuminating the concrete walls of the socialist apartment blocks in deep orange before fading.

I keep asking myself one thing here... did I sell out in those days? Did I disown the people I wrote about?

Continue, it sounds you are having some interesting thoughts here...

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[1] One of the researchers of this group, Wojciech Łukowski, has been particularly influential in the process of the project.

[2] Founded by Kazimierz Brakoniecki and Robert Traba (whose work has been important in the process of the project), http://borussia.pl/index.php/fundacja-borussia/ (viewed 3.04.2024.)

I mean, disown the community from the control over the story, through my own work of communicating and translating it? Did I take away the stake of the community via the subtle force of a translated representation of their story? Did I effect an encroaching integration into a heritage development paradigm for the palace that prioritised other identities than theirs?

Why cast aside doubts, when they make perfect sense? Why all those question marks? Decisions have shadows.

I made a conscious decision, I was aware of the risk and the shadow. But, in the end my wish to counter normative understandings of the past and to do something about the fact that parts of the story are left out, weighed stronger than the risk of disowning. Can't we sometimes use our privilege of access for somebody else? Which is worse: to patronize by highlighting overlooked and undervalued histories, thereby reshaping the still-developing historical master narrative[1], or to neglect using one's privilege to seize an opportunity to make a difference?

You seem concerned, but uncertain; an uneasy decision infused with lights and shadows, won't turn black or white, will stay uneasy in its outcome also.

Are you some kind of Zen master, now? Such decisions are not easy to take, but they are exactly that: decisions with consequences on either side of action.

Sticky Collaborations

This is the moment when you invite somebody to stay for a few days and they just move in with you. But you also don't really oppose, because the house has no proper roof yet, and it doesn't really belong to you either. Yet, you did have a plan for it. So what do you do now?

The first proper festival takes shape in 2018, the year after the exhibition: product of a series of coincidental encounters that happened mostly during the exhibition summer, when I ran an activity week with free tours and a community arts project. A pianist declared they will come back and play a free concert in the castle; a local group of visitors offered their help as volunteers; a young dramaturg, who had written a play about the palace wanted to direct it onsite; two outdoor artists asked to get involved; list continues. Before I knew it, I was in the middle of organising a

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[1] cf. [Smith 2006].

week-long event at the palace with zero budget but uncountable hands to help realise the idea. My network of friends and fieldwork contacts supported my initiative. I followed the strategy of coming with empty hands to give everyone the chance to contribute and add their share. That way, the festival became a joint effort from an entire community of fieldwork contacts and newly joined local and international volunteers.

Thereby, moving on from the previous phase of pushing for narrative representation, the event became a next step of opening the castle to local residents and visitors, who had been excluded from the castle space and from the planning developments. The potential of emerging and inventive spaces was something I had seen evolve in Michael Kurzwelly's applied art activities in the German-Polish borderlands around Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice: his vision of the participatory spatial fiction Słubfurt and Nowa Amerika that transcended national boundaries and narratives had become part of everyday experiences and future making-processes in the area.[1] In Kurzwelly's words:

> *"Large realities" seemingly imposed on us from the outside, are merely conventional notions that we have accepted as a valid social norm. Because of this, we can, through target 'reordered spaces', create new constructions. By living according to such a redefined space, it manifests itself essentially as a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.[2]*

I saw the space of the festival as a re-ordering tool to counter Kafka's self-fulfilling prophecy of the palace as site of domination within post-German and post-socialist entanglements of power and affect. Festivals create a shared sense of time and place, of being together, doing things together, sharing experience in the here and now and making memories for the future. Festival communities appropriate space, make it their home, their temporary community. Our emerging festival thus mobilised the potential to create such a space.

Using the fragile privilege of my half-heartedly tolerated access to the castle, I wanted to start encouraging local residents, visitors, and related NGOs to claim *their* share of the castle now and for the future; to give them the confidence not to wait for an explicit invitation, but take the initiative to realise their own ideas. I developed this concept of shared, performative heritage in former writings [cf. Wadle 2012].

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[1] https://nowa-amerika.eu/slubfurt-3/ (viewed 09.04.2024.)

[2] Transl. from Polish. Talk by Michael Kurzwelly at the National Gallery of Poznań: Konstruowanie rzeczywistości jako metoda stosowana na terenach pogranicza ("Construction of reality as applied method in the borderlands"), https://mnp.art.pl/event/konstruowanie-rzeczywistosci-jako-metoda-stosowana-na-terenach-pogranicza (viewed 09.04.2024.)

Thematically, the focus shifted from the previous year onto another historical event of relevance: from the post-War history of the palace to the World War II history of the castle[1]. The main reason for this was the recent launch of a book translation (German into Polish) that told the history of the last East Prussian owners of the palace and their tragically ending engagement in the failed assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler led by Claus von Stauffenberg. The palace, in close proximity to one of Hitler's former headquarters, the Wolf's Lair, had been an ambiguous site – both a place of resistance against the Nazis, where the Lehndorff couple and their associate conspirers were planning the attack on Hitler's life, and one that was inhabited by Nazi German foreign secretary Joachim von Ribbentrop and frequented by members of the Nazi government and Hitler himself. The availability of the publication for a Polish-speaking audience gave the chance to share and reflect on this part of the castle history across languages.

This was probably one of the most catchy and valuable stories to single out the palace against other similar buildings. And it was at the same time one that carried an exceptional symbolic capital for German national identity politics. Following my premise of opening the festival to all involved stakeholders and lobby groups around the place, I had invited a Germany-based organisation with expertise on the East Prussian owners of the palace to present this version of the story. Due to the thematic focus, the festival was offered a small sum of funding for a concert from the cultural budget of the German embassy, which we accepted.

How I saw myself and my activities – as an engaged UK-, and later Poland-based researcher, an anthropologist-cum-activist – started to diverge strongly from the way I was read by others: My person and the event I organised became a convenient docking point and cultural broker for German-speaking heritage activists and the German diplomatic environment; to them, I was clearly an engaged German national who cared for cultural heritage and transnational understanding in former East Prussia, for "German-Polish relations", and for advancing German memory culture. The question, which cause the festival ought to be serving was work-in-progress and part of a negotiation, in which I found my initial heritage vision to be increasingly utopian: power relations between the involved organisations became obviously

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[1] The festival was entitled "Spacer/Spaziergang/ Walk" and referred to the social, political and affective role that walks, public and private, seen and unseen, in the garden, in the forests, or on horseback had played for the World War II history in the place. One of the examples being that it was during walks that plans about the attack on Hitler's life by General Stauffenberg on 20 July 1944 were passed on and drafted. Another that Nazi Germany's Foreign Secretary General Ribbentrop, who had occupied one of the wings as his residency near to Hitler's headquarters from 1941–1944, and lived with the Lehndorff Family, liked to have his Sunday walks in the park, which were photographed for the benefit of creating attractive propaganda material.

unequally distributed and some invitees came to stay and claim their stake in the project. Thereby, the definition of value generated through the festival was shifting together with the new partners that invested in it.

The Gift

Somebody always invites the other: A husband his wife, a parent their children, a queen her people, a lord the village.

When analysing the situation of the festival and my decisions in it, I like to return to an article on the transformative potential of the festival by David Picard [2016], in which he uses Victor Turner's [2017, 1969] concept of the festive frame. In the article, the author argues that festivals

> "*suggest an overarching metaphorical framework for social life, entailing simultaneously a myth of origin, a value guide to exemplary behaviour, and a story explaining the separations within the social world*" [Picard 2016: 603].

I support the proposition that a festival is a cosmological site of immense normative potential, able to help communities through significant changes and crises in their lives. It is thus a precious space for making change. Part of the suggested festive framework by Picard is the type of circulation of wealth and resources that facilitate the festive excesses of different kinds. This resonates with my concerns: the funding structures of an event are a system of obligations as is any flow of capital; they can foster equality and participation or patron-client relationships. We know since Marcel Mauss [1967, 1925] that the gift is an act of reciprocity, and Daniel Graeber [cf. 2014] has reminded us how the powerful have used reciprocity and the shared fiction of debt to keep their power. It is not exactly a secret that whoever pays for the party, owns it, owns its values and its cosmology, and will use it to ascertain the political order the festival space produces. If there is no balanced circulation of resources between the festival actors, the power relations established in the festival are more easily maintained. We have already started the story of our festival funding and so let me continue it.

In the autumn after our festival, I received an invitation to the German embassy for a meeting about the reconstruction of the castle. It was the first of its kind and many more should follow. I had entered the building only after presenting my ID and opening my bag. Looking at my ID reminded me of my nationality and I imagined others were reminded, also: especially invitees of the meeting with Polish nationality. I was entering my national territory and they were leaving theirs to discuss about the future of a castle in Northeast Poland with East Prussian heritage. The meeting was held in German, at the time Polish translation was still available upon request, later, despite counter-voices, these translations were treated as optional, under the assumption that "everybody knows German". I had been assigned a slot on the agenda

of the meeting by the host to talk about the festival and its achievements and our goals for the future. A meeting that takes place in an embassy, no matter which one, carries an obvious flavour of importance and authority. Being invited to it had the character of an appointment not to be rejected. In addition, I had felt an obligation to reciprocate for the support the embassy had granted the festival that year and the one they had announced in the future. I had thus accepted and prepared a presentation.

After the presentation, and once more, after the overall meeting, a leading representative of a German-Polish funding body approached me: "Do write a funding application to our foundation for the festival in the coming year! If you have any questions, you can contact me", they said loudly, so that everyone around could hear it, too. As a scholar who had intensely worked on German-Polish relations and as a practitioner who had, before her PhD research, been a leader of numerous German-Polish youth encounters, I was already familiar with the German-Polish project funding landscape and this particular foundation also.

Such binational initiatives came out of the Declaration of German-Polish Friendship (14 November 1989), the following German- Polish neighbourhood agreements (17 June 1991) between the German Federal Republic and the Republic of Poland, where both states pledged cooperation between Germany and Poland in many fields, including cultural heritage, community encounters and cultural work.[1] Guided by those agreements the key purpose of the abovementioned foundation that had offered a funding opportunity was "*to allocate financial support to projects which are the subject of mutual interest of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Poland.*"[2] The start-up fund to the foundation had been made up from the debt-repayments of a large credit from West Germany[3] to the People's Republic

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[1] There was an important political edge to these agreements, some aspects of which are relevant for understanding the entanglements of the festival. Firstly, the agreements asserted the final, contractual settling of the post-World War II borders – which bore relevance mostly with respect to the formerly German territories such as the Polish part of former East Prussia; this had been a big cause of uncertainty and tension between the two countries. Secondly, the agreements (this was laid out in detail in a separate agreement) initiated a transformation of the financial debt that Poland held towards the Federal Republic of Germany since the financial credit over one billion DM from 1975.

[2] Point 1, Translated fragment of the statue of the foundation, https://sdpz.org/die-stiftung/satzung (viewed 21.05.2023.)

[3] Point 2 "The founding fund resulted from the capital and interest payments to be made in Polish currency, in accordance with the agreement, in instalments of the financial loan granted to Bank Handlowy SA. w Warszawie by Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau, Frankfurt am Main, on 31 October 1975 on the basis of the agreement of 9 October 1975 between the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Government of the Polish People's Republic on the granting of a financial loan." Translated fragment of the statue of the foundation, https://sdpz.org/die-stiftung/satzung (viewed 21.05.2023).

of Poland[1]. I had actively avoided tapping into this funding landscape, as I did not want our event to function within this dominant framework of a "German-Polish Project". It was thought of as an independent initiative that created an alternative, critical and playful space of its own, outside state agendas and their inherent asymmetries, as recently critiqued by German historian Felix Ackermann[2] [2022]. The project was not intended to engage large-scale national historical narratives of guilt and indebtment between two nations; it shied away from being framed within

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[1] The era of First Secretary Edward Gierek stood under the star sign of investment and new levels of consumption in Poland. Increasing demands for energy and globally rising oil prices aided a political course of significant state indebtment credits from capitalist "Western" economies; paired with domestic factors this ultimately led to the collapse of the Polish economy and public upheaval in worker's strikes and the Solidarity movement about the austere living condition that the state economy had created. The German credit to Poland came with a diplomatic and economic strategy: upon its discussion in the Bundesrat of Germany on 7 November 1975, the members of the legislative organ that complements the Bundestag, highlighted that the exceptionally long duration and interest subsidy (in contrast to the other Polish foreign credits) of the loan was supposed to "lead to a strengthened economic relationship with Poland and a lasting improvement of the German-Polish relationships"; further, it was emphasized that much of the credit would be spent on investing in German businesses and deepening economic relationship, or you could say dependencies (p. 310, section B). An aspect that should not be omitted, but that exceeds the realm of what I am able to discuss in this paper, is that the agreement was bundled together with two other ones: a less controversial agreement about pension and insurance payments for remaining Germans in Poland, and, more importantly the agreement of the Polish state to grant 125 000 individuals, meaning individuals of German origin, the permission to leave Poland for the Federal Republic. The records of the exemplary debate in the Bundesrat mention the words "humanitarian" as an argument to agree to the agreement bundle, alongside "human trade" with respect to the connection between the loan and the release of individuals, alongside the German "mortgage" of guilt and perpetratorhood with respect to the necessity to provide economic support and foster longtime economic relations with Poland: these are pieces to a large, complex and morally entangled debate on German-Polish relations after World War II, in which the Holocaust, the terror on the Polish people, the destruction of Warsaw and other Polish cities, the post-war territorial divisions and borders as well as the suffering of German minorities in the former German Eastern territories in the aftermaths of the War are recent events, the diplomatic meanings and civil aftermaths of which are actively shaped in the political present. Resource: Bundesrat, Bericht über die 425. Sitzung, Bonn den 7 November 1975, https://www.bundesrat.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/plenarprotokolle/1975/Plenarprotokoll-425.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2 (viewed 21.05.2023).

[2] My attention was drawn to this article when two more senior German-Polish activists, one German national, one Polish national, discussed it at the palace festival and expressed shock with the author's argumentation, as well as feeling personally attacked. They found it misguided to deplore power asymmetries between Germany and Poland, and argued that since there will never be a power balance between any states and one will always be stronger in some aspect, the goal would not be balance, but good management of the power inequalities.

the larger purpose of what was commonly termed the reconciliation between the two nation states.

The previously related speech act of inviting me to submit a funding bid to the foundation, framed by the formal setting of the German embassy, and witnessed by a community of heritage activists and state representatives, had thus the effect of an unwanted gift on me. I did not want it as it came with its own strong visions and trajectories, but also I could not refuse it as it could have led to the festival to be claimed illegal and soon prohibited, while at the same time knowing that I would have to reciprocate it. The invitation that certainly entailed encouragement and positive feedback for the previous events, also came with expectations and ideas about the future of the place. It further reflected the desire of a larger community to assimilate the initiative and functionalise it for their purposes.

In the chain of events, the Berlin-based association who had contributed to the festival in the same year, approached me with the offer to write the funding bid in their name and under their legal wings – as a registered association in Germany and in cooperation with a regional Polish partner of theirs. This was, because at the time, formal requirements to apply for funding were not yet fulfilled for our emerging festival team: Each submitted project had to be run by a legally registered organisation from Germany and one from Poland to be in the drawing pool for funding. I was hesitant about agreeing to the offer: from the start this was not a cooperation between two equal partners, but rather one of an accepted incorporation. So, what from one perspective was a step towards finding good ways to generate funding for the event and reliable partners, from another, it was an acceptance of structures that questioned the initial premises for the festival. The following festival hence happened under what might be called the protectorate of the German NGO and their Polish partner organisation, and included a significant investment from their side into the festival, thanks to which we could apply for an equal amount of funding from the German-Polish foundation.

After the festival of 2019, I spent weekend over weekend of the following autumn and winter working out how to prepare the final budget to suit the formal requirements and fit the pre-prints of the grant-giver. I painfully came to understand that our event had been designed to be accountable to itself and to its own purpose and goals for the future. Since the first year, in 2017, I had written and shared comprehensive reports that critically assessed the festival goals and listed the budget. Thence, the event had not in the first place been designed to be accountable to our new funder. Anyone who writes project applications and reports to external grant givers knows that this is impossible to do without a) playing *by the* rules and b) playing *the* rules of the grant giver. This results in a savvy performativity, in which projects are projected into the future and evaluated not only in relation to themselves, but

in relation to the values and language of the grant giver. Pragmatically speaking, I understood the necessity of those new routines, but from an activist perspective, it saddened me to give away (some) of the reporting authority to the foundation, making the event thereby productive for the project of (bi-)national politics and diplomacy.

Project, process and product were inseparably entangled (cf. also [Sansi 2019: 722]). I would have preferred its unproductivity on any formal national level, leaving all meaning to the participants of the event exclusively, for the sake of itself. Or is that so? This wish hides some hypocrisy as it comes from an anthropologist-academic, who in this moment is making the project productive for her own process of meaning making and value creation in the empire of the academy.

Soliloquy (3/4)

Konin 6.40 am, Intercity Express to Warsaw. H. on her way from Poznań to attend a palace related meeting in the German embassy.

Should I have said no and never accepted the invitation for the funding bid or the collaboration at this point? And to whose benefit would that have been?

Well, you didn't say no, did you? So, what do you want from me – a confirmation that you were right, or a moral lesson, about how you were wrong? We always decide for something – just as I said earlier. If it makes you feel better, why don't you explain, what your reasoning was, when you made the decision?

Can't you just once give me an opinion? At the time, I came to the conclusion that rejecting the offer would be a self-centered choice. Wasn't the festival I wished for mainly one that satisfied my own desire as a social anthropologist and cultural activist? Wasn't I, too, focused on putting my ideas, or rather my ideals into practice, more than anyone else's? Local residents actually wished for a fast reconstruction of the palace – no matter by whom and in which form[1]–, future performers would benefit from playing in a more financially secure set-up, and the entire group of heritage activists who were passionate about the castle restauration and essentially open to the project, wished to support us with the premise that it was somewhat aligned with the overall agenda.

Alright, well said. But you did keep worrying about turning in the project to "the Germans" who would appropriate it and take over.

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[1] This widely held opinion emerged during my field research and it persisted over the years.

All the time. ALL THE TIME.

So what do you consider yourself as, then?

The GUA

Those deep-lying concerns that I am clumsily trying to give shape to through my writing about the festival are both specific to me and to the space which I am co-creating with others: As a German-national who works in Poland and Anthropologist in post-Prussian Poland, I am reminded of the *gua*, a cannibalistic, liver-eating witch that threatens the life and sanity of people in Buli, Indonesia, of which Nils Bubandt writes about in "The Empty Seashell" [2014]. The *gua* takes charge of individuals who then cause a threat to others. Perpetratorhood is as much a feared option as victimhood.

> "*This multiplicity of ways in which a person can become a gua makes the possibility of becoming a gua as likely as becoming its victim. As much as daily life is concerned with protecting oneself against becoming the victim of a gua, it is also about convincing others and oneself that one is not a potential gua*" [Bubandt 2014: 53].

This incessant fear of contagion with evil spirits – and of becoming a host for them or being consumed by them, resonates with me on the other side of the globe: I cannot discard the feeling that there is a *gua* out there that could be dangerous, attacking and consuming me, or also using me as a host to attack others.

I am in nagging uncertainty about what form this witch takes and what languages it speaks. The witch – the haunting of imperial pasts and practices of violence that have endured all the transitions and changes of heart by translating themselves into new practices, figures of thought, blind spots in the memory, supporting structures, networks, shared affects – into the sturdy and yet often unnoticed residual matter that Ann Laura Stoler evokes in "Duress":

> "*The geopolitical and spatial distribution of inequalities cast across our world today are not simply mimetic versions of earlier imperial incarnations but refashioned and sometimes opaque and oblique reworkings of them*" [2016: 4].

Like Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska [2024] and Karolina Kuszyk [2019] ask about other post-German areas, I am asking about the festival in Post-Prussia: what is happening to the ghostly memories – German or not – in this area, where are they, and are they being recycled or reused, or something else? My answer is personal: I am

haunted, my actions are haunted by the game of guilt and loss, by the pedagogies of emotion about the past of both Germany and Poland, by the suffering and longing of all imperial subjects in the history of the area who fell and fall through the grids of national and diplomatic self-preservation. I am scared of East Prussia, because you can do nothing right here – as an anthropologist, activist, German citizen.

Every move in the present carries the spectre of broken pasts and of a future, in which its meanings will be taken away from you. In German Samoa, the work of German Anthropologists was slowly appropriated and used by the colonial regime to govern their colonial subjects [Steinmetz 2004]. Their work, often anticolonial in character, was later used by the imperial governors and turned into guidelines for good governance of colonised peoples. What are and what will be the "uncontrollable afterlives of ethnography" [Steinmetz 2014] here, in Northeast Poland and former East Prussia, where multiple neo-imperial and colonial endeavours are at play, concurring and competing, waiting for each other to make mistakes or to lose territory? My ideas and colourful activism, not so unlike the ones of my colleague in Samoa, quickly travelled beyond my comfort zone into new realms of value extraction: they appear as images in the investment portfolio about the village, evidencing the vivid cultural activities around the palace and its future worth for the neighbouring leisure complex. They are used as evidence of social engagement and inclusivity in international funding bids and political lobbying by the German-(Polish) heritage project leaders.

In-between German heritage desires and the capitalist value extraction of a neoliberal enterprise in an overall climate of Polish right-wing ethnic nationalism with offensively anti-German politics – there are of course limits to the analogy with Samoa. But in both places, the debates between political and economic elites were messy and multi-voiced, reflecting the socio-political positionalities and values of the different external elites with governing aspirations about "good governance" for a new (or re-emerging) sphere of influence. In this political spectrum, then and now, there was space for anthropologically inspired forms of governance – back then promoting to be in tune with local customs and customary law, today praising participatory, inclusive, community-oriented governance. But the two of them remain arguments about how to best govern the other, not whether to govern them at all. And both in Samoa and in Masuria anthropological knowledge was and has become welcomed for governing the future. It was a matter of time then and now to get entangled and be made to fit the political project as anthropologist, be it in person or via the knowledge one had previously produced.

Part III
New Reasonings, Shifting Attention and Accountability

After one year of learning to deal with funding bodies and the new festival partners, 2020 could have been a year of normalisation; but then everything stayed as unusual as usual.

It was a few months into the preparation of the next festival edition, when television channels showed Italian military vehicles transporting huge numbers of coffins outside of Bergamo. Life across the globe, including Poland and Germany, had come to a non-anticipatable halt: the COVID-19 Pandemic had reached us. Borders, including those in the Schengen-Zone, for instance between Poland and Germany, were temporarily closed, trains stopped running between the two countries. As societies and individuals, we were to surprise ourselves with our new, situational and pragmatist rationalities in this state of exception.[1] New, adapted forms of reasoning and prioritizing were also to evolve in my reasoning about the festival. Within the new team, we all agreed quickly that the festival would not be cancelled in 2020 – that each previous festival year had been uncertain enough for us to learn how to improvise and deal with the unknown during and in the run-up to the festival. We were closely watching the news, following new scientific knowledge about the virus spread, checking the German-Polish border situations, comparing the legal regulations in Germany and Poland about lockdowns, safety distances, limits of persons in spaces, restrictions regarding certain activities, such as singing or dancing, and the overall organisation of cultural events.

The fast-track digitalisation of meetings through the pandemic worked in favour of the organisation process. We were regularly meeting in our newly evolving transnational team to develop a festival theme and programme for 2020. In the run-up to the festival, we expanded the festival website, adding a festival exhibition space with contributions from different parts of the world and creating the format of a weekly Q&A session live from the castle, which was hosted by the onsite palace representative and varying guests and streamed via Facebook live. We were preparing ourselves to run the event online and offline, depending on how the situation was unfolding. My earlier discussed concerns about the entanglement of power, national interests and related forms of value creation in the funding

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[1] I, for instance, after almost ten years of confident automobile abstinence, decided to buy a car in the last minute before border closure and drove from Poland to my home town in Germany.

relationships were pushed to the backdrop overnight. [1] Other decisive factors had moved to the front stage.

We were facing not only a health crisis, but also, as one of its many co-morbidities, an amplified precariousness crisis in the arts. As a non-commercial festival producer with access to funding I had privilege and responsibility to alleviate this situation: I could use the festival to create employment opportunities. Programming and grant writing was different for me in this situation than in the previous year: I did it confidently and proudly to be able to make a small difference. I had sworn myself that I would not let any available funding go to waste and use our prior festival experience of dealing with uncertainties as an asset for making the festival happen in 2020. But that was not all: we were in a situation, in which social insularity and isolation seemed more obvious threats than before and it was easy for grant-givers to identify the challenge of keeping transnational civic cooperation alive.

With the cancellation of numerous previsioned projects and constantly changing legal ground rules for public gatherings, our funders allowed for much flexibility regarding the programming of the event, while giving generous funding security. Thanks to this funding flexibility, we could wait until a few weeks before the event to decide that all concerts and events would be happening onsite. We decided to stream them online in cooperation with the local television, who had learned to stream religious services in the prior months. In that sense, my concern from the previous year that we would have to adapt to a stiff corset of funding rules was reversed, and the funders understood that the practice of resilient and adaptive planning, had become the only *modus operandi* for cultural events during the COVID-19 pandemic.[2]

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[1] This does not mean that the festival lost any subversive edge and that I agreed to every proposition that was put forward to me: in a friendly message I rejected the suggestion from within the German embassy to devote the 2020 edition of the festival to the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union through a projection of the European Flag onto the castle. Moreover, a rainbow flag would adorn the festival flyer in solidarity with LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland, whose rights were increasingly cut at the time.

[2] The open-air festival programme was designed to comply with safety standards and in a way that avoided close contacts: while keeping stage events – concerts, a solo theatre performance, and a roundtable debate – we had resigned from interactive onsite elements in the daytime, such as workshops and children's activities, and also from our international volunteers' programme. The following year, after vaccination campaigns, better knowledge about the risks of COVID-19, and looser legal regulations in Poland, we introduced the format of themed masterclasses and guided walks around the village, in which it was still possible to allow participation to individuals with different health needs.

Showcasing the Palace and Staging the Periphery

When Vladimir Putin started Russia's war offensive against Ukraine and its people by mobilising the military to attack and invade the country on 24 February 2022, geopolitical meanings, imaginations, and alliances across the globe underwent overnight changes. Some of these changes reverberated in the castle, the festival, and the communities connected to them. If previously the closeness of the castle to the Russian Oblast Kaliningrad had mostly been of interest for history enthusiasts, homesick tourists, and for those who were commuting for informal trade, it now obtained a new urgency and reason for concern for everyone in the region and beyond: local families took a fatalist stance, stating "if something is supposed to happen it will happen", Ukrainian War refugees only reluctantly moved into Masurian accommodations that were too close to the border with the aggressor[1], and German tourists crossed Masuria (and Poland, Czech, and the whole of "The old East Block") out of their lists of holiday destinations for this year[2], just to be on the safe side. As to the heritage activists: the fact that the castle was located within this field of geo-political tensions had altered the story they told about the present and future of the castle.

This became necessary for two reasons: the new German government announced budget restructurings, fitting both the support for Ukraine and their own, altered political priorities. Meanwhile the relations between Poland and Germany were reaching a low point.[3] In this climate, the members of the discursive community began to view and emphasize the value of the castle as a strategically meaningful site for demonstrating the presence of a strong European, German-Polish alliance in the present and in imagined post-War futures. The peripherality of the castle was no longer on the minus list, but had now become an asset and argument in its political and metaphorical value negotiation. This value was further carved out in the planning report of an expert working group that had been appointed by the planning commission, where the site was, among others, framed as forum for European dialogue[4]. If the castle had already increasingly been presented as an asset to national identity politics (in Germany), now, it seemed, its international political value (for

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[1] A coach driver on the way to North Masuria was overruled by a group of Ukrainian war refugees to bring them back to Warsaw, when they realized they were driving towards the Russian Border.

[2] https://podroze.dziennik.pl/aktualnosci/artykuly/8567702,niemcy-turystyka-wojna.html

[3] Firstly, over the German economic relations to Russia, then over the military supplies to Ukraine, and finally over Poland's request for reparation payments.

[4] The committee, in which the author of this paper was a member also, presented its final report in April 2023 to the castle working group and on the 7th festival edition in August 2023 to the public.

Germany and the German-Polish alliance) as a site of present and future diplomacy and soft power was becoming unquestionable.

Our original festival programme was actively altered by those developments. Increasingly, there were additional events to be accommodated in the festival period that made the site relevant for diplomacy and identity politics. These events, notably a large award ceremony with high ranking politicians, were organised by other active members of the heritage group and we had to make space for them in the line-up and accept that they changed the entire tone of our initial programme. Furthermore, the festival was refashioned with invitation-only-events alongside the public festival: these consisted of planning assemblies on the one hand, and special incentives such as boat trips or dinners on the other. Such events created an edge of enigma and exclusivity to an event that had been created with the vision of radical openness and inclusivity. Those developments also raised the suspicion of the Polish festival partner who called the festival a parachute and a UFO, reproaching it to land in the region, take place, and leave nothing behind. Our experienced partner had been involved in social research that had explicitly addressed processes of cultural domination in the area.[1]

Thanks to these modifications, the festival could increasingly serve as a showcase event for heritage lobbying among political decision makers, potential private donors, and representatives of the media. Since the German-led heritage community had come to the conclusion that the most representative season for the castle was the festival period, there was more pressure on me and the organizing committee to play along and do justice to this showcasing of the palace: we were asked to adapt the festival dates to the visits of particular groups of invitees; to be thoughtful about the visiting delegation of stakeholders when developing the festival programme; and, finally, some parts of funding were directly designated to programme elements that had *a priori* been decided by the funding body: specific artists, speakers and others. This shift diverted attention from developing the event for and with local community members.

The heritage community was not the only one to have a close eye on the festival and its realization. The festival activities were also critically watched by the investment company, who was giving the touristic part of the village an expensive makeover, leading it into a new era of tourism, in times of remote work and digital nomadism. What was happening at the castle was relevant for the future of their investment, too. While we received support in using some of the facilities for our concerts, we also added value to the company: the festival provided free cultural entertainment to guests and brought in more guests that came for the festival only. However, used to

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[1] Cf. Fatyga et al. [2012].

the pace of an investment over millions, and the work of PR professionals and event managers from the capital, our neighbours were increasingly impatient with the organisation of the festival that was clearly unprofessional to their standards as well as with the slow pace of the heritage project at large – its lengthy planning meetings and no tangible budget in sight.

Soliloquy (4/4)

Tuesday night jam session in a local pub of Jeżyce[1], Poznań, mid-May 2023. H. sips on a drink while listening to the improvisations of aspiring and seasoned musicians from the neighbourhood.

Do I sound angry to you?

I don't know. Not so angry now, more disappointed, I guess.

What do you reckon I am disappointed with?

I wouldn't dare to answer that question for you.

I failed, right? Or did I? Or is it all a success: the success of attracting public investors, of creating a flair of hope and possibility, of making space for shared vison of the future? Didn't I intend to become invisible at some point, anyway? The festival was a provisional format, nothing more.

Suppose you were hoping appropriation would happen a bit differently.

I saw things coming that way, I wasn't naïve. When I started, I thought, carve out a corner now, because this story you are telling is not one for the main stage. So I was ready to fight for the margin and a representation of it from the start. We are dealing with the centre stage of a castle – whoever owns it, will want to put meaning to it, and whoever puts meanings to it, will own some of it.

Do you want to own the castle?

You got me there, probably I do, let's be honest about it.

I see. What are you going to do about it?

I shall bring my people.

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[1] Jeżyce: name of a gentrifying neighbourhood with many bars and restaurants in Poznań, Poland.

Conclusion: Dilutional or Delusional Activism?

Over the following years I grew fond of the idea of rebalancing the festival event, of initiating a recalibration of the social and political spectrum of the festival by including new participants, whose presence would help changing the tone, the atmosphere and the engagements on site. Important elements of that rebalancing of the crowd were a residency for emerging artists, workshops with regional experts, an international volunteers' programme, and, notably the work with university students from the Anthropology and Ethnology department, where I worked. I had introduced the festival during the semester, sharing my doubts, difficulties and the questions that I was asking myself as an anthropologist and cultural activist in that place with them. At some point, some of my students had approached me with the desire of getting involved. I was glad when they joined the organising committee. Following the premise of the idea of dilution, I hoped that the increasing imbalance of participants to the event from the past years could be addressed and altered. If the atmosphere of a festival was a bit like the composition of a perfume – then adding some new scents to the previous composition and diluting the mix could radically alter the overall fragrance.

In my mind, as mentioned previously, the festival itself, was based on the premise of shaping the present together and thereby crafting a memory and a realm of self-realised possibilities that was owned by those who participated in the event. This kind of cultural activism is what I have called performative heritage. Following this premise, altering the present of the event was a logical and promising intervention that supposedly implied real consequences.

Of course, this is only a very fragmentary description of the much larger and more complex processes that happen with placemaking. And insofar it was not long until doubts started to surface. Participation in a place, co-creating its meaning and making it to be *something new*, does not mean that we are automatically the owners of this *something new*. The use of artists for urban gentrification has been widely shown to be a common strategy in longer processes of disowning – both of artists and of the residents of housing in the given areas [cf. Tunali, 2021; Gądecki 2012; Dziadek and Murzyn-Kupisz, 2014]. My persisting concern that had already partially proven true was that all this creating of an eventful present with many contributors, would ultimately, in one way or another, be appropriated by owners – corporate investors or a nation state that would claim the place as part of their narrative. What we were creating through our own resources and for ourselves as a community, would be employed for the future-making of others.

And there were more concerns: the idea of diluting the crowd was insofar illusionary that there were power relations and assumptions about the others at play that had tendencies of subjugating them. The increase in number of new participants

from diverse backgrounds did not automatically ensure that they all had an equal standing or the same claims to the place as those who initially began using the festival as a platform for their political displays and visions of the future. Rather, there was the possibility that these new participants would be allocated secondary roles of serving and doing the productive labour of the festival, such as PR, social media, photography, merchandise, while others consumed it and employed it as a backdrop to their political trajectories. Of course, this is an oversimplification of a process, in which value travels not only in one, but in many directions. In the end, those who volunteered on the organising committee acquired knowledge, experience and skills, and obtained a reference letter that opened them professional doors. However, the evolving division of labour at the festival was concerning, and I hadn't done enough to address this issue: Ultimately, it was the members of civil society who were working without compensation, while state representatives and corporate leaders capitalized on the event for their political agendas, potentially displacing those who had genuinely invested their efforts in creating it. So, while the principle of dilution did become an important element of changing the crowd and of adding perspectives, values, and trajectories, it came with the bitter aftertaste that I was providing and possibly establishing the structures for an unpaid workforce, who was used and would in the future be used to cater for the labour and production of an event that was less and less self-governed.

In this context, I am turning back to the question that community-based intervention artist Kathrin Böhm asked herself in the process of self-assessment: "What do I produce and what do I reproduce with the way I work?" [De Waechter 2019: 1]. I am further compelled to ponder the path of value creation: who can and will the festival serve most and what is the long-term perspective, what kinds of reciprocities [cf. Picard 2016] can it foster? What can my action, the work I do, add to this process? What, if I facilitate a slow disowning of the palace to the local residents? What, if I contribute to re-establishing and perpetuating relationships of social inequality and elitism, speeding up marginalisation and exclusion and post-feudal thinking?

"*Engaged anthropology is open-ended and experimental. It involves taking risks. There is no guarantee an intervention will be successful.*" Kirsch notes [2018: 223], a note that one might misunderstand as a warning, but that, in my reading, is more of an agreement with oneself and the community of anthropologists that when becoming an engaged (or entangled) anthropologist, the possibility of failing, making mistakes and hitting walls must be consciously included and accepted in the decision of engagement. This possibility of failure must be weighed up with the option of letting the chance of engagement pass for good. And in doing so, we say farewell to the seemingly innocence of non-engaged anthropology and its remoteness from the option of entanglement beyond text. Creating a space of encounter and a

crossroads of different stakeholder groups in the equation of the palace and within the framework of German-Polish cooperation without the above listed questions and pitfalls, has turned out to be utopian.

> "*Our challenge for the planet is to transform longing into action. The path leads from utopia to heterotopia. Society becomes a laboratory where the future is tried out and failure is allowed*"[1],

write members of the *artivist* collective around Michael Kurzwelly at the German-Polish border. They encourage to accept failure in the process of engaged, imaginative future making and emphasise that results strive for a reality-checked, rather than idealist character. Between the lines of this statement, I read the warning that those reality checks and the movement from utopia to heterotopia can feel like failure, sometimes. And that there are many different protagonists who may want to transform longings into actions, and whose longings might coincide in funny, awkward ways with our own. Returning to the previously introduced idea by Kurzwelly that *artivism* and entangled anthropology may disruptively and imaginatively interact with the seemingly self-fulfilling prophecy of social spatialities, I am left wondering about the limits of challenging or even undoing such self-fulfilling prophecies (or shall we call them a type of hauntings? Or moments of duress?).

The palace itself is such a suggestive framework: even if it tries to reverse the inequalities it is based upon, for many, these very inequalities are the first, fetishized points of reference, the Dream, the Legacy, the Field of Practice. A similar effect comes when working on transnational, civic projects within the German-Polish framework. Cultural activism within the framework of German-Polish cooperation in post-East Prussian spaces can summon hauntings of past and present, especially, when national political trajectories are directly getting involved in the process. While such cultural activities may attempt to create a shared space of encounters, if enmeshed with national interests in the German-Polish context, they come with the risk of reifying divisions, inequalities, trauma, and privilege.

Following Jacques Derrida, Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska[2] presents the hauntings in (post-)German spaces not as something to be resolved but to be attended to: as a call to notice untold stories and blind spots in our vision and to give them shape. If not to resolve the hauntings, what can be the work of entangled ethnographers in places in which we feel processes of appropriation and essentialisation that are stronger

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[1] *Michael Kurzwelly, Karsten Wittke, Joanna Kiliszek,* https://nowa-amerika.eu/project/art-saves-the-world/ (viewed 09.04.2024.)

[2] *O tym, jak rzeczy zmieniają się w duchy* (How things turn into ghosts), talk by Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska for Copernicus Centre, https://www.youtube.com/live/DQmkbiBkGMc?feature=shared (viewed 09.04.2024.)

than us and even feed on our identities? While we may still need those labels and frameworks for strategic essentialisms in the struggle for equality or representation [Matthes 2016: 360–61], it is crucial to continue striving for alternative ways of associating that are less essentialising and divisive and less attached to genealogies of national power-constellations. Deconstructing the seductiveness of the palace is as much an ongoing, never-ending process as reconstructing or maintaining the palace. This can happen in the form of cultural activism, and other times in critical writing and auto-ethnography. Sometimes one form of engagement reaches its limits and needs to reshape into a different aggregate state to continue and shape thought and future action.

Post Scriptum: In autumn 2023, I stepped down from my role as the festival manager and have since spoken to many individuals about this decision. Writing this article has been part of this journey. While I am still supporting the continuation of the event and sharing contacts to artists, local groups, interested volunteers and other networks, I have decided to stop offering my free labour for the event and the emerging surrounding political context as a cultural organiser. The feeling of aporia the festival activities evoked in me had become too burdensome over the years to justify continuing them as before.

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DIGITALIZING THE PERFORMING ARTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN LATVIA: TRANSFORMATION OR SURVIVAL TACTICS?

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Abstract

The article seeks to answer the question of whether the transformation and acceleration of digital content in performing arts during the COVID-19 pandemic are determined situatively or are a naturally stable trend initiated by the development of ICT. It focuses on the theatre industry in order to understand whether theatre performances in the digital environment and the use of digital elements in performing arts do not create a confrontation with the necessary sense of physical presence.

The research data showed that the practices of using digital environment elements and digital technologies in the creation of theatre performances were both 1) a **short-term** solution, as it allowed staging a play, working with actors remotely, as well as creating products that are available to the audience in conditions of distancing requirements, and 2) gave an acceleration to the spread of digital innovations in the theatre industry in general, which was especially manifested in the works of directors who are open to the search for new experimental forms and the ambition of artistic excellence in theatre art, thus generating a **long-term** development potential. On the one hand, the sense of presence, including physical presence and simultaneity, is still recognized as the most essential feature of theatre and also a certain measure of quality. On the other hand, it is recognized that the possibilities of digital solutions,

including artificial intelligence and other technological resources, may also change and erase the boundaries between the real and digital environments in performing arts as well.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, theatre industry, digital transformation, social connectedness, sense of presence, simultaneity, "liveness".*

Introduction

Compared to other culture and creative sector industries, such as literature, media, design, architecture, cultural education, etc., the consequences of COVID-19 are felt the most by representatives of the performing arts, such as the opera, theatre, contemporary dance, and music industries, which have been directly affected by the restrictions on public events [Latvian Academy of Culture 2020: 25]. At the same time globally and also in Latvia, various forms of "quarantine culture" new hybrid art forms and genres, alternative art communication formats evolved, indicating a process of accelerated transformation towards innovation [Radermecker 2020; Mak, Fluharty, Fancourt 2021; Hylland 2021; Bradbury et al. 2021]. For example, in Latvia, a study on the impact of the pandemic on the cultural and creative industries revealed that the proportion of the population consuming arts on the Internet had increased from 19% to 45% [Latvian Academy of Culture et al. 2020: 29]. During the pandemic, the role of the digital environment in both creating and channelling arts products grew. The restrictions on presence attendance forced cultural organizations to look for new ways how to reach audiences, and one of them was various digital solutions and online events. In the survey of cultural organizations it was concluded that in the last two years 56% of the surveyed organizations have implemented some digital solutions [Laķe et al. 2022: 86]. The data show that the attitude of cultural organizations towards the digital cultural offer in the post-pandemic period is ambiguous – for some organizations, the digital offer is permanent and currently happens more often (21%), while for an equal part it has decreased (19%) [Laķe et al. 2022: 86].

Digitalization of the theatre environment with the search for new forms of textuality has been observed in Latvia since the beginning of the 21st century, using video projections, animation, augmented reality, and other techniques offered by the metaverse in theatre performances [Lēvalde 2020: 39]. However, "digital metamorphosis" was forcefully driven by the restrictions of the pandemic, causing intense discussions about whether the performing arts in digital format are "real theatre"? Is this an actual digital transformation or just survival? During the research it was found that there are three different trends in the views of those working in the theatre industry. Directors and actors believe that even the highest quality of digital

solutions cannot replace the experience of physical presence in the performing arts [Rutkēviča 2020; Keišs 2020]. Scholars' and theatre critics' views are ambivalent, ranging from neutral to excited about a new, open theatre that is "in line with the global world" [Lēvalde 2020; Svarinska 2020]. In terms of audience, for instance, young people who prioritize digital content feel comfortable, because they have no nostalgia for traditional theatre, which the older generation longs for.

Thereby, the article seeks answers to the question of whether the transformation and acceleration of digital content in performing arts during the COVID-19 pandemic were determined situatively as a reaction to the situation of limited resources or whether they were a stable and global trend initiated by the development of ICT. Our focus is on the theatre industry in order to understand whether the representation of theatre productions in the digital environment and the use of elements of the digital environment in the creation of theatre performances do not create an experience of physical presence. The aim of the study is to examine whether the new digital delivery strategies in Latvia can be seen as a tactic for short-term survival, or whether they contain long-term industry development potential. Do digital forms of theatre have sustainability potential, and under what conditions?

Social studies, as well as different studies in humanities and arts [e. g. Ford, Mandviwalla 2020; Houlihan, Morris 2022; Bissel, Weir 2022;] show that performing arts institutions, including theatres, are under increasing pressure to accept the manifestations of digital transformation. Digital technologies are changing not only how the audience engages with art but it affects the whole cycle of creating a theatre performance – starting with the director's creative idea, the creation and form of the production of the play, as well as the place where the theatre performance is shown. However, it must be recognized that the initiatives created by the digital transformation in the cycle of creation and communication of the theatre performance are very fragmented, and it is not yet possible to evaluate them systematically and make certain generalizations. Therefore, our research approach is related to an in-depth study of the anatomy of a single performance, aiming to shed light on these processes with special emphasis on the interpretation of the analyzed processes based on the director's experience. The theatre director's experience and reflection on all stages of the production cycle of the particular play chosen for the analysis is interpreted in the context of the time when it was staged and published, namely, two months after the establishment of epidemiological restrictions in Latvia. It is a time when, under the influence of distancing requirements, face-to-face art experience is normatively impossible; at the same time, it acquires a special value in the perception of both creative persons and the audience. This context has a decisive importance in the choice of the object of analysis and the approach, where the experience of staging a performance is studied in the discourse of the sociology of art, namely,

focusing on the effects caused by epidemiological restrictions in performative art. The conceptual and empirical scale of the study does not foresee such analysis of the director's performance, including the artistic techniques, which would be based on the methodological principles of theatre art criticism.

The findings of the study are illustrated by Elmārs Seņkovs' digital performance "The Iranian Conference" (a play by Ivan Vyrypaev), created by ESARTE company, which in 2021 received the highest award at the national level for performing arts in the category "Event of the year in the digital environment", which was first established because of the pandemic.

Reason and focus of research interest

The choice of the research topic is based on three main intersected dimensions, namely, during the epidemiological restrictions of COVID-19 the experience of physical distancing arose massively in society, and digital solutions were integrated into the offer of theatre art. At the same time, discussions about the role of presence in performing arts and about its importance, possibilities, and sustainability in the context of digital forms of art offer were brought up. This, in turn, forces us to focus on researching the perspective of both theatre makers and audiences in order to conceptualize the relationship between digital solutions and the phenomenon of presence in the theatre arts field.

One of the greatest changes in the consumption habits of culture and art was caused by a lack of physical presence. The World Health Organization in its recommendations for "COVID-19 Response" has marked the difference between physical distancing and social proximity, inviting people to communicate through social media platforms and communication technologies, thus encouraging and sustaining virtual social connection within families and communities:

> *It is therefore important that while practicing physical distancing, people should maintain and even increase social proximity through non-physical means, for example, through social media platforms and communication technologies [WHO 2020].*

At the same time, the *World Happiness Report 2021* emphasized that physical distancing during the pandemic became a risk factor for well-being and mental health. Thus, naturally, people increased their use of digital media as a means to connect during the pandemic [Okabe-Miyamoto, Lyubomirsky 2021].

Living in conditions of physical and social distancing and with feelings of fear and a sense of physical threat, there was a growing need for social experiences that would compensate for such a sense of social isolation and insecurity. In this situation,

the concept of social connectedness becomes relevant, which can be defined as the experience of belonging to a social relationship or network [Lee, Robins 1995], or else – as a short-term experience of belonging and relatedness, based on quantitative and qualitative social appraisals and relationship salience [Bel et al. 2009]. The concept of social connectedness is mostly applicable to group activities such as leisure, exercise, cooking, befriending, arts and crafts social activities, etc. [Bowins 2021]. It is quite natural to consider how social connectedness deeply affects quality of life and health [Deitz et al. 2020; Swarbrick et al. 2021].

Research shows that the arts can be one of the factors that greatly promote social connectedness. For instance, HEartS, a public health study funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) striving to advance our understanding of how arts and cultural engagement in the UK can support people's lives, revealed that "the majority of respondents (82%) perceive their arts engagement to be linked with feelings of social connectedness at least some of the time. The forms of arts engagement most linked with feelings of social connectedness were attending a live music performance, watching a live theatre performance, and watching a film or drama at the cinema or other venue" [Perkins et al. 2021: 1208].

At the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions, the culture and creative sectors, just like tourism, lost 90 percent of their turnover, thus being included in the list of economic sectors that have been hit the hardest. Because of this, during the pandemic, organizers of cultural and arts events offered ways how to save the industry with the help of new, digitalized art forms. It helps to ensure physical distancing while maintaining social proximity. At the same time, regarding the performing arts, it has to be admitted that, especially during the first stage, the situation was characterized by *ad hoc* solutions and a combination of idealism, voluntarism, and amateurism [Hylland 2021]. There is no doubt that this situation also caused frustration within the industry itself:

> *Theatre and its practitioners have been deemed non-essential in this moment and our refusal to acknowledge this has resulted in disposable digital work that dismantles the very intimacy our form demands. We're being asked to exit the stage, not give an encore* [Berger 2020].

Digital environment also in Latvia was filled with a large range of performative art products. As a result, the number of productions of theatre performances, compared with the previous years, significantly increased [Rieksta-Ķenģe 2020]. Critics admit that the offers during the pandemic have become so intense that it is even possible to choose several of them within one evening. At the same time, "with each new performance, e-theatre processes become more and more refined and well thought

out, because the viewer's attention has to be competed for" [Ulberte 2020]. Gradually, the ways in which performances were offered to the audience have improved in terms of quality. Video recording technologies for performances developed; other audiovisual formats were used; performances were created on various online platforms, etc. Quoting performer, writer and theatre maker Bianca Mastrominico,

> *Our process has gradually shifted into experimenting with making our live presence digitally 'alive', and the screen-space has become the primary environment in which the image/body of the performer exists, moves, interacts and reacts as if in a primordial cocoon, in which signs and meaning are reinvented through responsive interaction, while also testing the limits of the virtual space* [Mastrominico 2020].

All these processes, in turn, created a basis for the continuation of the discussions about the role of presence in the theatre industry, despite the fact that it's really not so easy to find anything else to add on this topic [Sherman 2013].

The role of physical presence in the performing arts events: theoretical perspective

Questions about the role of live versus mediated art experiences have already been discussed in art science, art sociology, and anthropology, where the main debate is the claim that the live event is "real" and that the mediated is "unreal". As media theorist Friedrich A. Kittler notes,

> *Once the technological differentiation of optics, acoustics, and writing exploded Gutenberg's writing monopoly around 1880, the fabrication of so-called Man became possible. His essence escapes into apparatuses. Machines take over functions of the central nervous system, and no longer, as in times past, merely those of muscles. (..) So-called Man is split up into physiology and information technology. (..) Romanticism notwithstanding, numbers and figures become the key to all creatures* [Kittler 1999: 17, 19].

In these discussions, the face to face or physical presence experience is prioritized over the mediated experience, as pointed out by cultural theorist Philip Auslander: "The common assumption is that the live event is "real" and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real" [Auslander 2008: 3].

With the reference to Jean Baudrillard that the definition of the real is that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction, the "live" performance, according to Phillip Auslander, can be defined as "that which can be recorded". Thus, definition of live performance, according to him, is "a performance heard or watched at the time of its occurrence, as distinguished from one recorded on film, tape, etc." [Auslander 2008: 56]. Liveness indicates the situation when "the performers and the

audience are both physically and temporally co-present to one another" [Auslander 2008: 60; Auslander 2012: 5; Auslander, Es, Hartmann 2019].

The dependence of performative art on "the presence of living bodies" is also emphasized by critical theorist Peggy Phelan, who highlights the nature of performance as nonreproductive art *per se*:

> *Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance* [Phelan 1998: 148, 146].

Theorists of performance studies Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye with the reference to the etymological data of the noun 'presence' argue, that in representational theatre it is precisely a performance of the relationship between the 'I am' and what is *in front of* or *before* that constitutes the 'dramatic action' to which spectators are witnesses [Giannachi, Kaye 2017: 8]. Presence, accordingly, is the medium through which the subject engages with as environment [Giannachi 2012: 52].

In the context of the interpretation of the empirical material of this study, the concept of presence has been aptly described by artist, writer and performance maker Tim Etchells in response to Gabriela Giannachi's question about the implications of the word 'presence'. Etchells emphasizes aspect of synergy between performer and audience:

> *I mean, in an era in which everything is fragmented and mediated, the live actor is the one who stands up and says 'I am here. You can look at me'. There's a huge simplicity to a lot of the live work that we have done – a sort of peeling away of things to the point where we are often standing in a line at the front looking back at the audience – and very much measuring this body on the stage and this bunch of people watching; measuring the distance between the two* [Etchells, Giannachi, Kaye 2012: 190].

In the Latvian theatre industry, critics and professionals are using the concept of *sense of presence* (*klātbūtnes sajūta*), which is similar to Auslander's concept of *liveness* in the sense of the pre-digital era, when this category was seemingly able to be "captured" outside of rapid technological development [Auslander 2012; Auslander et al. 2019].

It is worth adding that, compared to other forms of performing arts, theatre is very popular in Latvia. The traditions of Latvian professional theatre date back to before the establishment of the national state and are related to the period of constructing Latvia's national identity in the second half of the 19th century [Struka 2022]. Nowadays, for 1.8 million people, there are 24 professional theatre art companies, half of which receive public funding [Latvijas Jaunā teātra institūts 2023]. Networks

of professional theatre associations and participation in international organizations have traditionally been developed in Latvia.

The pandemic has triggered the digital transformation of the performing arts in Latvia in two often interrelated directions – digitization, which focuses on converting data from analogue to digital format, and digitalization, which is a process whereby various areas of social and cultural life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructures [Brennen, Kreiss 2016].

At the same time, the situation has raised questions for the industry, such as how to live in this "screen reality"? Do innovative products lead to a redefinition of the "real theatre"? What is the value of digital formats for theatrical productions when physical presence experiences are available?

Trying to answer these questions, a problem emerged during the research. On the one hand, the opinion that digital solutions cannot replace the experience of live presence in the performing arts still prevails among the theatre art professionals as well as among the audience [Tišheizere 2020; Rutkēviča 2020; Lēvalde 2020; Laķe et al. 2022]. On the other hand, it must be recognized that the digital environment provides effective benefits both for the creation of new art forms and for the inclusion of new audiences, including young people.

The aim and methodology of the study

Thus, keeping in mind the above, the aim of the study is to examine whether the new digital delivery strategies can be seen as a tactic for short-term survival or whether they contain long-term industry development potential. Do digital forms of theatre art have sustainability potential, and under what conditions?

For the purpose of contextualizing the research questions, a qualitative content analysis of media and professional theatre art publications was made. The results of the content analysis formed the basis for the selection of one specific performance as the research object.

Empirical research design is based on a qualitative approach, using a case study – the anatomy of the creation of one play – Elmārs Seņkovs' performance "The Iranian Conference" by Ivan Vyrypaev. "The Iranian Conference" depicts the formal meeting of intellectuals of various fields, their wide-ranging conversation, and assessment of the situation in the Middle East. At the same time, it is a discourse of Otherness that questions the categories of openness, empathy, and love in the context of human values in the 21st century.

Within the scope of the case study, the director's reflection and experience regarding the motivation of the play's production and the choice of techniques during the COVID-19 period were brought up to date, and the director's subjective

assessment regarding the role of the used artistic and digital technological techniques in a long-term perspective was established. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews with the play's director, other theatre directors, actors, theatre scholars and critics, as well as a focus group discussion with young theatre and film industry professionals. At the same time, the opinions of theatre and film industry professionals were used for context assessment and data interpretation.

The case study selection rationale was based on three aspects, namely, the play was acclaimed for excellence by theatre critics;[1] it has received the national award in performing arts in the category "Event of the year in the digital environment 2021"; and it has been included in the "Latvian school bag" offer, which is a prestige state-funded cultural education programme for school students that allows them to get acquainted with the best works in various fields of arts [Latvijas Nacionālais kultūras centrs 2022].

Research findings and director's perspective

The director's opinion was chosen as the main source in the research of the topic in order to identify the vision of a creative person about the manifestations of digital transformations in all stages of the theatre production cycle and to constitute a future vision of the related issues based on the experience of artistic creativity.

In the course of the research, the performance director Elmārs Seņkovs was interviewed, and was asked questions regarding (1) motivation and prerequisites for choosing the play and the digital format; (2) the role of sense of presence or liveness in the performing arts from the artist's perspective; (3) possibilities of the digital format, including reflection on audience needs and attraction of new audience segments; (4) a perspective on the use of digital solutions, also after epidemiological restrictions.

In order to emphasize the director's "voice" and point of view, the researchers' conclusions are argued with quotes from the transcription of the director's interview.

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[1] For example, this is what critics wrote about Elmārs Seņkovs' performance "The Iranian Conference": "The show created by director Elmārs Seņkovs and a selection of Latvian actors on the online platform zoom.us "The Iranian Conference" is considered to be the leader in the short history of Latvian e-theatre. A two-hour long show that has almost everything that can keep the viewer glued to the computer screen" [Tišheizere 2020]. Also: "In this, let's say, not very exciting format, which differs little from TV news and discussion broadcasts, Seņkovs has managed to create a work of art, which can be followed with unrelenting interest for almost the entire two hours. Elmārs Seņkovs is affected by the theme of "The Iranian Conference" – how liberal society tries to build a relationship with what is unclear and incomprehensible" [Čakare 2020].

Stage of development of a creative idea: motivation and prerequisites for choosing the play and the digital format

Research findings from a director's perspective revealed that, regarding the motivation and prerequisites for choosing the play and digital format, two approaches could be outlined. Firstly, this was influenced by the individual psychological mood caused by the forced professional downtime imposed by the distancing requirements:

> *It was a time when all creatives were overwhelmed by the stupor that everything was being pulled off like a stopcock, ... an unprecedented feeling that everything was stopping, it turned on the feeling of inertia that something had to be done.*

Secondly, a significant part of the motivation was the ambition determined by the professional role of the director and the desire to prove himself in a new – digital – format. This side of the motivation also represents the above-described assumption of performing arts professionals that the digital environment is naturally associated with a mediated product, which in the context of theatre art means its second-rateness, inauthenticity, "artificiality", thus – lower quality. This orientation created a certain challenge for the director to try to create in the digital environment not only something accessible to the audience but also a high-quality art product.

> *The first observations were that initially many artistic projects appeared in the digital environment that were thoughtless, entertaining, of a private nature, without real artistic value, ... there was no hope that the audience would need it, I was sceptical, then I thought – it is easy to criticize what a digital project should be in the theatre art that could captivate, you must try for yourself!*

These two lines of motivation also represent, to some extent, the short-term and long-term dimensions. Short-term, because the pressure created by idleness to maintain the inertia of professional activity loses its justification with the end of the restrictions of COVID-19, but long-term, because the need to prove yourself professionally in the newly learned digital theatre environment by creating a show of high artistic quality remains.

In describing the development of the creative idea, the director emphasizes that he tried to create a theatrical performance in zoom online format while claiming maximum artistic quality. As criteria for this quality, the director cites his goals: to preserve documentality as well as "closeness" to the conventional theatre form, which presupposes physical presence and simultaneity.

Regarding the sense of presence in the context of "The Iranian Conference" production, the director claimed that:

It was important that the show "fits" into the theatre format. I paid a lot of attention to documentaries, ... we recorded each actor where he was, and I paid special attention to how each actor created his environment. (..) Documentary and a sense of presence is created by the absence of editing and expressive close-ups of the actors. (..) Documentary and spontaneity were ensured by the fact that I wanted to hurry to be ready at the given time – 2.5 weeks of work, and it was ready.

Production stage of the show: the role of a sense of presence or liveness in the performing arts

The possibilities of the digital environment can also change the practices of staging a performance, for example, by using an online format in rehearsals. Physical presence and bodily contact are essential features of theatre art. The director argues the importance of these aspects by referring to his experience working with actors.

Regarding the importance of the sense of presence in the performing arts on the whole, the attitude of the actors towards it is very clear, according to the director – they need a physical presence very much.

The actors all say that they want to touch physically. I don't know if people can do without physical touch, it is very important for an actor to feel a partner. Applause and loud appreciation are very important. This is the purpose for which they do something, any artist is an artist to be recognized.

Reflecting on the role of the presence effect in working with the actor during the production of the play, the director sees a special authenticity, only characteristic of face-to-face work, which is largely determined by the unpredictability of the situation. The director interprets the latter factor as the opposite of the predictability factor of the digital environment. Still, working with actors in presence is considered a priority, especially when valuing the possibility of an error.

I really like working with a living person, with his psychology, with his unpredictability... virtual reality provides a programmatically predictable result. ... but for a living person, an actor in a performance, there is a possibility of error. This is a very interesting and valuable thing in the proceedings of live theatre. That's what I'm most interested in, any mistake creates drama. The mistake is conflict, conflict is drama.

In the director's view, the precondition of presence during the production and rehearsals of the play is an essential part of the creation and value of the theatre performance, as it gives it a unique dramaturgical value based on the practice of presence, including artistic mistakes and failures.

The effects of digitization on attracting new segments of the theatre audience

From the director's point of view, one of the most convincing benefits of using elements of the digital environment in theatre is the creation of a connection with those segments of the audience that prefer the cultural and artistic experience obtained in the digital environment. The director admits that creating this connection requires a particularly high level of empathy and understanding of the values and feelings of the target audience.

The director highlighted several possibilities, offered by digitalization, especially emphasizing the possibilities of reaching a young audience:

> *If young people prefer to be in the digital environment, then artists must respect this, and be able to tear them away from TikTok with their offer ... I have to make a show so, that they don't even open the phone. I have to use the signs and symbols that young people recognize...*

On the other hand, theatre as an environment could compensate for the deficit of presence and intimacy in the everyday lives of young people.

> *Another, albeit difficult path: in the theatre we can talk about what "technology does not speak" – about human feelings, delicate areas, delicate matters, ... a place where a young person sees touches, intimacy, fragility ... Maybe theatre should remain conventional and give the young audience something that they will never get on a tablet.*

The director's opinion is ambitious: the live theatre experience can act as a compensatory mechanism for the deficit of physical presence and related emotions and feelings in the human experience caused by the digital environment. In his vision, the value of the communicative and social attraction potential of the theatre could increase in the future.

The use of digital solutions in the theatre industry: effects and perspective

The director's opinion on the interaction between the digital environment and live theatre contains two thematic lines. One is related to the blurring of the boundaries of art forms and genres and the acceleration of these processes under the influence of digital innovations. The other is related to the increase in the instrumental value of theatre, its potential to become a testing ground for scientific discoveries and innovations.

As one of the most important benefits of using digital solutions related to blurring the boundaries of the arts, the director sees the possibilities of expanding the audience's experience, which works similarly to the film art.

> *Theatre is a work with time – we can compress it, stretch it, travel in time and space, we can create a social theatre of empathy and experience, give people the opportunity to visit war zones, etc. The digital environment opens up new opportunities.*

The new technologies, which contribute to the possibilities of expanding the experience, serve as a technological basis for the development of new genres of theatre. It can become the basis for creating an experiential theatre. The director emphasizes that the processes of the fusion of genres have started and have been going on for several decades, but now they are particularly visible.

The digital format intensifies the blurring of the boundaries between genres and art forms.

> *The digital environment, of course, demolishes the stage space, it continues the transformations initiated by the theatre – efforts to break out of the theatre house (immersive, inclusive, audio performances...), development of interdisciplinary art forms – dance art with theatre art, theatre art with audiovisual art, etc. There are no boundaries in performative art... The digital environment also allows you to tell the story in many different ways.*

At the same time, the need to preserve the special identity of the theatre and the specificity of the artistic language is recognized, and the need and desire to continue the traditional theatre format still remains as a very important aspect among theatre professionals. First of all, a view of the epidemiological period of COVID-19 as a crisis that is transitory has appeared:

> *We hoped that it was a temporary and passing moment. The situation of having to stop the art process and try to exist only in the digital environment, also in art, was interesting, it was worth learning, but we lived with the idea that it was temporary. Theatre, however, requires a moment of live encounter.*

The depreciation of the digital format of performances was represented very clearly in the interviews:

> *Although digital performances have all the parameters of theatre: time, space, dramaturgy, actors, I hoped that I would not have to stage digital performances in the future. Uniqueness is important for the theatre. Digital theatre cannot compete with live theatre.*

As already mentioned, the second thematic line, as the director views the interactions between the digital environment and the theatre, is the possibility of expanding the utilitarian and instrumental value of the theatre art product in the future.

Regarding the perspective of the use of digital solutions after epidemiological restrictions, the director outlined several possible fields, such as the idea that digitalization can help communicate innovations or play an important role in the distribution and popularization processes of the performing arts. The director pays special attention to the potential of art to serve as a communication platform for innovation and scientific discoveries:

> *I would really like to use technology more so that the theatre can surprise, show new discoveries in science.*

Even more, the director believes that with digitalization, theatre can become a field of experimentation for virtual socialization opportunities and for new technology tests. Such a vision reveals the artist's desire to give theatre an additional function – as tester of the ethical potential of science communication and innovation. The director admits that he, as an artist, is also subjectively interested in the scale of technological possibilities, not only their potential to create a reliable duplicate of reality but also the ethical issues of using newly created technologies:

> *...waiting for scientists to create effective and widely usable virtual reality technologies.... To test and understand how far science can take us. Will we be able to socialize without leaving home?*

> *I also want to use everything that allows me to ask questions: do we need it (technological innovations)? Is it dangerous or not dangerous to humanity? If I use bots, do I want to know if they are a threat to our future or not? It is important not only to use technology for selfish purposes but also to ask questions about its value.*

In general, the director admits that the question of the effect of presence as an integral feature of theatre art is only a question of the level of technological development. The director claims that the digital environment can probably compete with the sense of presence, but this could only be achieved with a very high level of innovations:

> *If the digital environment wants to compete with "live theatre", then they must have high-class technologies, like 5D effects – with scents, lights, air... We can move towards the effect of the presence of theatre art in virtual reality, but whether it*

will succeed depends on whether scientists succeed in creating the effect of authentic presence in a virtual environment. I believe that with effective technologies, scientists manage to keep us in the virtual environment more and more...

Such a vision points to the long-term changes that digital transformations and technological innovations bring to theatre art, affecting also the most essential feature of theatre art – the phenomena of presence and simultaneity.

Conclusions

The research data allow us to conclude that the situationally (during the COVID-19 pandemic) provoked practices of using digital environment elements and digital technologies in the creation of a theatre art product were both 1) a **short-term** solution, as it allowed staging a play, working with actors remotely, as well as creating products that are available to the audience in conditions of distancing requirements, and 2) gave an acceleration to the spread of digital innovations in the theatre art industry in general, which was especially manifested in the works of directors who are open to the search for new experimental forms and the ambition of artistic excellence in theatre art, thus generating a **long-term** development potential for the new value dimensions of the theatre art product and for the audience.

The search for these new forms is accompanied by an internal and mutual discussion among those working in the theatre industry about the limits of theatre as an art form and about maintaining its specificity and quality in conditions when elements of the digital environment are used both in the creation of the performance and its distribution. The sense of presence, including physical presence and simultaneity, is still recognized as the most essential feature of theatre art and also as a certain measure of quality. At the same time, it is recognized that as the possibilities of the digital environment, including artificial intelligence and other technological resources of this environment, develop, the definitions of "presence" and "simultaneity" may also change, erasing the boundaries between the real and digital environments in theatre art as well. As it is emphasized in UNESCO's vision of the future of culture,

We need to work to ensure that culture is accessible to all, and that the full diversity of humanity's cultural expressions can flourish, both online and offline [Ottone 2020].

The results of the research revealed a dilemma regarding the fact that digitalization is currently considered a short-term solution on the one hand and a potential platform for new art forms on the other. Is it possible to deal with it?

The answer is "yes", but with a condition: the digitalization of the performing arts has long-term potential only if it is not opposed to the sense of presence or liveness and can provide the effect of presence. It is crucial to point out that presence in this context is seen as a prerequisite for high-quality performance, but the ideas about the fact of presence, which is reinterpreted as a "feeling of presence", can differ. This sense of presence can also be achieved with various artistic expressions and/or technological solutions.

The research data also create a basis for a new discussion in at least two directions. Firstly, the director's subjective reflection on the integration of digital solutions at different stages of the production cycle of a theatre performance draws attention to potential transformations in the value of the theatre. Special attention is paid to the fact that with the spread of digital transformations, the experience of a theatre performance can acquire a new emotional, communicative, as well as utilitarian value and role [Troilo 2017]. Secondly, the artistic activities of creatives, including theatre directors, during COVID-19 revealed new manifestations of resilience in art, especially in the form of transformative resilience [Frigotto et al. 2022] in theatre. The field of research questions and discussions is expanding, which affects the endurance of theatre as an art form, especially in conditions where an intense wave of innovations affects both expressions of presence, audience behaviour and consumption habits, as well as artistic taste and society's symbolic and value systems.

As a final remark, it is useful to refer to a sentence by Father Augustin in "The Iranian Conference":

> The point is not to look for a new form. Content also needs forms. Look not for new forms, but for necessary forms.

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BUILDING AN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY OF IRISH DANCERS IN THE TIMES OF DETACHMENT

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Abstract

This paper is focusing on the ways of building (and breaking) the community around Irish dance. Today being a dance style practiced worldwide, it creates opportunity for international communication of its practitioners through competitions and shared workshops.

The first part of the paper is centered around a case study of dance group called "*Festival Irish dance Russia*". The Festival style of Irish dance has originated from Northern Ireland and priorly has been practiced exclusively there. The years of pandemic have transformed the habitual ways of passing on the knowledge and connecting with the community. By adapting to new realia, Festival has transformed into a more accessible artform to the dancers worldwide, simultaneously reshaping the community of dance practitioners.

The second part is examining the dynamics in the community after the beginning of Ukrainian war and the effects that it had on identity, sense of belonging, and life of this social group. Dance itself being far down on the list of priorities in these devastating times keeps playing an important part as a social connecting glue for the community, giving a chance for establishing connections and broadening the worldview of the practitioners through international communication.

Keywords: *Detachment, Irish dance, building community, multiple identities.*

"*How can I dance if people are dying.*"
[Google survey conducted after the Russian invasion in Ukraine, summer 2022].

In these dark times all the 'extracurricular activities' (dance also being such) seem to have become a luxurious excessiveness. Though these activities themselves seem pointless, the remailing social connections and the power of communities that are centered around these activities prove to stay ever so relevant. The artistic practices also have the power of shaping identities simultaneously "*negotiating internal strivings and external prescriptions and of channeling frustration and rebellion*" [Crispin 2009: 25]. Unfortunately, the troubled times have given a chance to put this theoretical statement to the test. As one dancer indicated in the survey that this research is based on, "*on the one hand, I feel wrong when we dance, chat, laugh, i. e. rejoice. But on the other hand, this is a way to stream the emotional discord into creativity – it's a type of psychotherapy*" [Google survey 2022]. The years of pandemic and war are showing different social dynamics in relation to physical and emotional detachment, which this research is focusing on.

Detachment

The key concept chosen for this study is **detachment**. In Yarrow's summary on the conceptualization of this term we see three types of detachment: (1) of the researcher from the studied phenomenon; (2) detachment in Latour's concept of dichotomies; (3) detachment which marks the borderline between tradition and modernity [Yarrow et al. 2015]. However, he points out that the "association between modernity and detachment became a trope ripe for continual reinvention and re-elaboration" [Yarrow et al. 2015: 11]. So, my aim would be exactly to shift the focus and to add to the listed above: (4) psychological and emotional **detachment from the group/state** that the person used to identify themself with; (5) **physical detachment** in the years of COVID-19 created by the social distancing regulations. So, the presented research is focusing only on the last two types.

It must be noted separately that the researcher herself is a part of the studied field, so it would be impossible to step out fully from it and explore the detachment of the first type. The strategy in this research is to give the other dance practitioners a voice, trying to stay aware of own identity and position in the field. Referring to the vivid image of the **self** in the field: it is similar to looking into the pool of water and trying to see not only the reflection on the surface, but also the underwater world [Stoeltje et al. 1999].

Research questions

Since the main concept taken for consideration is **detachment**, the research questions are connected to the two sides of this notion: it's (unexpectedly) fruitful vs destructive effect for the community of dancers. This paper is focusing on a case study of a community of Russian dancers who dance Irish dance and, in particular, on a "Festival Irish Dance" school, which is specialized on the Northern style of Irish dance. The research questions that will be posed are:

- what insights might the mentioned above concept of detachment contribute to the analysis of the dynamics within a studied community;
- what are the new means of transmitting creative ideas, uniting the practitioners, connecting to the audience, building, and breaking an international community in the times of detachment;
- with a sub-question: how are the multiple identities forged in this process.

This research was started in the autumn of 2021 and at first was targeting only the years of pandemic, however it expanded after the beginning of the war.

Research methods

The author is also a dance instructor and a head of the dance school "Festival Irish Dance, Russia", who has also been a part of the Irish dance community for the last 19 years. Constant presence 'in the field' and being included in the dancing life allowed to have participant observations and conduct informal interviews with dancers, dance judges, musicians, dance teachers. Consequently, one of the research methods for study was **autoethnography**. This study is an attempt to approach the field kinesthetically, not to be a *disembodied researcher* [Barbour 2011]. I feel that the dance field, being physical in its essence, leaves the researcher no option but to let the body live through a certain experience. Following Barbour's theoretical framework, the 'knowing' should not be seen as purely 'reasoning', it has also the aspect of embodying [Barbour 2017]. The lived experience has a unique voice and gives a new perspective to the researcher, since it incorporates a "*person's biological (somatic), intellectual, emotional, bodily, artistic and spiritual experience, within their cultural and geographical location*" [Barbour 2017: 220]. Since this experience is linked to 'cultural and geographical location' (looking into dancers of Russian origin get involved in Irish dance) this research needs a wider lens to catch the bigger picture.

For this reason, I conducted one online anonymous **survey** and used one online **questionnaire** among Irish dancers who are originally from Russia, organized in a shape of Google forms. The questionnaire was a targeted one, sent directly to the dancers of the online class of Festival Irish dance, without other sampling. These

dancers share roughly the same experience of doing Irish dance online, however the personal narratives, and connections to the world of dance vary.[1]

The survey on the contrary was open to all Russian dancers who dance Irish dance and who are willing to participate in it. General sample method was implemented: a link was shared through social media (VK social network site) allowing any interested Irish dancer/teacher to fill it out. The forwarding and reposting of the survey facilitated the spreading of it. In the end, it collected 116 replies. The survey was quite representative, as it geographically covered dancers from Moscow (majority) to Vladivostok in the most eastern point, Murmansk in the most northern point, Kaliningrad in the most western point, and Sevastopol in the most southern. The majority of respondents were women (the absolute majority of practitioners of Irish dance in Russia are female). They have dance experience from 1 year to 27 years and are members of either of the two international Irish dancing official organizations (CLRG or W.I.D.A.).[2] The respondents also expressed different political views in the open-end questions.[3]

Even though the surveys were anonymous, I realize that the potential drawback for this method could have been the fear of speaking openly in the online space about any topics even remotely connected to war. According to the statistic of OVD-info since 1 January to 14 December 2022 there had been 21,000 arrests and at least 370 criminal cases for anti-war statements. Following the new military time rhetoric, the category of "fakes" had been introduced (that is the information that investigators and courts consider deliberately false and that is being spread by any means) connected to the "special military operation", as it is called by the officials.[4] These factors might make the respondents extremely alert. Nevertheless, the dance community is usually

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[1] The questionnaire was anonymous, all respondents were female, with the dance experience from 7 to 15 years, three out of 8 living abroad permanently. Some example questions are: "Irish dance for me is… (finish the phrase), "The online classes for me are…", "I started doing these classes because…").

[2] CLRG – An Coimisiún Le Rincí Gaelacha (The Irish Dancing Commission) – the oldest official organization that regulates the dancing life in all its aspects. WIDA – World Irish Dance Association – an organization mainly targeting the dancers from Mainland Europe.

[3] Examples of the questions: "Are you in touch with the dancers from other countries?", "Has the war affected your dancing life?", "For me, the wider international dance community is…", "The social aspect of dance is… for me."

4 Among the most significant sentences that were based on the online activities were: 8 years and 6 months of colony for a stream on the crimes of Russian army in Bucha; 6 years imprisonment for a post about the destroyed drama theater in Mariupol; 3 years of colony for publishing posts about civilians killed in Ukraine [Svodka antivoennyh repressij 2021]. According to the article 20.3.3 of the Administrative Code ("discrediting the Armed Forces") the prosecution can be started based on the likes and comments on social media. The word "war" itself is considered as a discrediting one and can be used in the prosecution process under Article 20.3.3.

characterized by a high level of general trust, which is proven in the last question where the respondents were offered a blank space for any suggestions and concerns connected to the topic. There they revealed some outspoken and brave opinions with minimal political self-censorship.

Setting the scene

The actual word 'Irish' in the name of the dance style presupposes an ethnic connection to a specific group or location. However, in the modern world it is not the case anymore. As Gupta and Fergusson suggest "*the irony of these times, however, is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient*" [Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 10]. The territorial link, the boundaries of one locality, and the exclusive rights to a specific art form are the categories hardly attainable in the XXI century. Irish dance has become an internationally practiced artform even in the countries without a strong Irish diaspora (e. g. China, UAE, Mexico, Taiwan, Israel, Ukraine, and Russia).

Irish dance is also a multi-faceted style, it is not a homogeneous art form as it might seem. As Helena Wulff puts it, Irish dance actually exists on the continuum between the two poles of the 'crossroad dancing' (term used to describe a rural idyllic image of Ireland) and Riverdance [Wulff 2009] [1]. Here are a couple of examples of the substyles which the term 'Irish dance' unites:

- the competitive style (seen in touring shows such as Riverdance),
- sean-nós (the old style),
- North Kerry style (which originates back from 1700s),
- and Festival style (located in Northern Ireland).

The competitive style has been prevailing over the dance scene, thus creating an externally seeming image of an unvarying and unified dance genre practiced across Ireland. The biggest and the most prestigious competitions are held under the auspices of the oldest administrative body – An Coimisiún Le Rincí Gaelacha, founded by the members of the Gaelic League in 1927.

According to Skinner and Kringelbach, dance cultures are not static, but together with the translocal flows of people, images, and ideas they change and reshape [Kringelbach and Skinner 2012].

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[1] In the Irish dance studies the term 'crossroad dancing' is used to describe a rural idyllic image of Ireland where the dancing is happening on the crossroads. Riverdance – a world known shown which grew out of a Eurovision intermission piece and became a successful touring show.

In a nutshell, Irish dance in XXI century is a translocal artform, it shapes social life around itself through international competitions, summer and online workshops, and dance shows. The effect of that could be seen in the appearance of Irish dance schools around the world, which brings us to the case study of the research.

Case study

Irish dance schools spread around the world after the appearance of the show Riverdance in 1994 which introduced the world to this dance style. From that point the further development of the dance form is happening on local, national, and global level simultaneously [Foley 2001]. Mainland Europe and Russia experienced the Irish dance school boom in the early 2000. Consequently, the dancers of those newly opened schools got introduced to the social life of a 'typical Irish dancer' through dance classes with foreign guest teachers, international competitions, and performances.

However, as it has been said above, under the umbrella term 'Irish dance' there are a couple of different regional styles. The findings of the first part of this paper are based on the data collected in a school called "Festival Irish Dance" located in Moscow. The Festival style has originated from Northern Ireland and up to the most recent years it has been practiced exclusively in that region. This style is "*so called because the competitions, in which the dancers take part are at festivals that belong, in some cases, to the British Federation of Music Festivals*" [MacCafferty 2007: 24]. In other words, two different official organizations hold the competitions for the dancers of the South and North. Also, aesthetically being quite different from the mainstream competitive style, it plays a significant role in the self-identification of the Northern Irish dancers. According to an active Festival practitioner and teacher, dancers take special pride in the way they look and in their distinguishable repertoire. The slow speed of the music allows the dancers to become more submerged in the storytelling aspect of the dance, "*to move your audience, to connect with them*" [Sami Rantasalo 2014, 3: 15].

Even though the mainstream Irish dance became a recognizable trademark of Ireland with dance school sprouting around the world, information about Festival style outside of the original geographical borders is rather scarce. In contrast to the mainstream style which has its competitions around the world (e. g. the European Championship of 2024 is to be held in Romania), the Festival-competitions for Festival dancers are held only in Northern Ireland.

The Russian school of Festival Irish Dance was founded in 2018, though the schools of the mainstream style had been functioning in Russia since the early 2000s. However, since the outbreak of the pandemic the normal creative and social life of dance practitioners got suspended. The imposed challenges had to be faced in a new creative manner.

Building community in the times of detachment

The normal calendar year of an Irish dancer (no matter of which regional style) consists of the regular competitions, gigs, weekly classes, and rehearsals. These activities offer not solely a way of mastering the dancing skills, but also an opportunity of socializing. According to the dancers, adjudicators, and musicians, some of their best memories are made during these events. The shared experiences fortify the existing friendships and create new connections. With the abruption of these activities many practitioners experienced the sense of a broken lifestyle and moreover, with the inability to live the 'dancer's life', the loss of their self-identity as a dancer. All the activities got rechanneled to the online realm, where the classes helped the dancers to stay in shape, and even more importantly, to stay in touch with the community.

Even at the wake of technological era it was recognized that technology offers an innovative way of experiencing multiple identities [Kaplan and Turkle 1986]. This statement can be extended today – the online communities help keeping the existing identities alive. Since the extreme conditions of the pandemic years were also harmful for the psychological wellbeing, the online alternative gave a temporary substitute for the regular dance life. For many dancers the self-identification of Me-dancer is prevailing, and due to the shortness of a dancer's career, a skipped year of dance events becomes a huge gap. Zoom substitute offered a temporary solution and relief, which can "*illustrate how art can offer hope, relief, change, or an alternative view of the world in these turbulent times, and the international connections we hold and dialogues and practices in dance education around the world are flowing*" [Heyang and Martin 2021]. In the survey there is a category of replies that are highlighting the emotional support and relief provided by these online classes: "*<these classes give me>* beautiful *choreography, a sense of belonging to an international project, new dance skills*", "*positive emotions, my mood improves, vitality raises*", "*a charge of good mood, positivity, inspiration*" [Google survey 2022]. The online replica of the real in-studio dance classes "steadies" the mind and is seen by the practitioners as a bridge into the future 'normality' and habitual way of living [Skinner 2022].

The inability to participate in performances prompted the creation of a new way of artistic expression – the zoom dance videos. Dancers learned the steps online, recorded themselves, and sent the files for editing into one joined video, thus creating the illusion of dancing together. The videos themselves (at times recorded with poor quality, with the drying laundry in the background and pets running across the screen) might not be a part of a dancer's showreel, but they serve the purpose of reaching towards each other through the screen and uniting through one common task.

These regular activities helped to create a daily routine which became an important way of maintaining a healthy (mentally and physically) lifestyle in the

times of uncertainty. According to the dancers, the online format "*helped them to keep going*" [Google survey 2022]. Similar observations were made across the field, since the wellbeing (physical and emotional) "*is the routines that we are accustomed to and the expectations we have for our abilities and capacities. It is informed by our pasts and achieved into our futures*" [Skinner 2022: 89]. The experience of the participants resonates with the idea of communal creation of new shared spaces [Benthaus 2021]. In this case the dancer's body becomes a connecting tool: through repeating the steps demonstrated by the dance teacher on the small screen and observing others who are trying to repeat it, the dancers step onto the translocal scene. Thus is a network that facilitates the circulation of resources, practices, and ideas [Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013].

However, this 'dance life simulation' is lacking an important aspect also observed by the tango practitioners: dancing in your living room is a practice for the moment when all the restrictions will have been lifted and when people can return "*to the stranger's warm embrace*" [Skinner 2022: 90]. Time has proven for this observation to be on point: the dancers with Irish dance schools in their cities all returned to the offline classes when it became possible. The ones who stayed online are the immigrated dancers who physically cannot come to class.

An unexpected silver lining of the devastating pandemic outbreak was the growth of accessibility to dance related information. It led the way for "*decolonial, culturally relevant, and inclusive dance education*" [Heyang and Martin 2021: 311]. Festival dance style prior the years of pandemic was practiced almost exclusively in Northern Ireland. Even five years ago most of the Irish dancers, who had been brought up in the mainstream competitive tradition, were not familiar with the 'other' Irish dancing, that was happening side by side to them. For the dance teachers the loss of the stable income from conventional offline dance classes signified the beginning of the online era, which exposed the dance style to a wider audience. Before the introduction of online classes, the way of obtaining the new dance material was either through workshops in Ireland or thorough inviting the dance masters to the desired location. For foreign dancers the trips to Ireland required considerable financial expenditures often incompatible with the income level.[1] However, the online format offered an opportunity to join classes for a much lesser price (the average cost of a group Zoom class is 5 euros). Secondly, it opened a big variety of dance instructors, allowing the dancers to choose one.

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[1] The average monthly wage around Russia is approximately 600 euros (according to the pre-pandemic data of 2017 [Srednemesyachnaya nominal'naya nachislennaya zarabotnaya plata na odnogo rabotnika po polnomu krugu organizacij s 2017 g. 2017].

Lauren Smyth, one of the most distinguished Festival style popularizer, created an online platform the Lauren Smyth Academy, which is open for all Irish dancers of all organizations and schools [Lauren Smyth Academy 2023]. It grew out of Zoom classes and got popular with dancers around the world: there are dancers from Italy, China, Norway, Serbia, Japan, Canada, USA, Austria, Mexico etc. Prior the online teaching Lauren had been a Riverdance principal dancer for 10 years, however the touring life stopped with the pandemic outbreak, creating a lot of uncertainty for the future, and causing identity crisis. The formation of an online community had a therapeutical side effect. As Lauren puts it, "*I'm just so grateful for them and what they've pushed me to achieve in the past year. It kind of help need to be more settled and fulfilled in who I am and what I'm doing*" [Interview with Lauren 2022]. Dance teachers also had to learn how to promote themselves using the social media and to rethink the habitual way of presenting dance material [Lay 2021]. The growing accessibility of the international dance institutions of various sort is a general trend of the pandemic: attending Cunningham technique dance classes, or workshops of the principal dancers of major ballet companies, taking part in the online streaming – these are just a few of the opened opportunities [Benthaus 2021].

For the Russian school of Festival Irish dance, the shift to the virtual methods of teaching had also signified a certain expansion. Dancers from Norway, Cyprus, Portugal, remote Siberian cities got an opportunity to practice it with the associate teacher Jenna Hamill from Northern Ireland. According to the dancers, some "*live in a place where there is no school and no opportunity to start one*", or "*there's no Irish dance school in my town*", "*I live thousands of kilometers away from the teachers of the Festival style, which I really wanted to try*" [Google survey 2022]. The dance class literally came into their houses.

This process can be called the democratization of a very exclusive, in a regional sense, dance style. The restraints have opened new ways of spreading awareness about Festival, making it more accessible to a wider range of dancers. Now anyone with a computer and access to the Internet can learn it and thus become a part of the international community of Festival dancers.

The dance in this context is playing the part of connecting glue for the communities that otherwise would never come together. It has been well stated that "*it is difficult to think of the earth as a 'lonely planet' any more*" [Plant 2004: 62]. The online community is creating a safe space for a common dialogue mediated by dance. The conventional way of communicating ideas through the spoken language which has its shortages connected to misunderstanding is substituted by a universal dance language. Thus, the online format has also made another small step towards decolonizing the process of learning by opening the access to the information to a wider audience (the economical, communicational, spatial limitations become

surmountable). The strategies elaborated under the pressure of COVID have proven that even the major challenges can be turned to the advantages. Online world became a platform for creating new cultural spaces, where the online-based community is formed around a shared interest.

Breaking community

The second part of the research is centered around another type of detachment cause by the war time. As it has been said above, when the war started all the old ways felt meaningless. However, that is the time when social connections come to the forefront.

The concept of detachment in this case is expressed in other ways: detachment as migration, emotional detachment from one's nation-state, loss of one of the ways of self-identification, ostracism of Russian communities on the international arena. Different worldviews are fueling the heated debate between family members, teachers, dance schools, dancers, or communities which might lead to the break of those links. As the starting quote of the article states, "*how can I dance if the people are dying*" [Google survey 2022]. That is the matter of primary importance. However, when the old world is shattered the importance of the old existing cultural and social practices increase. These issues also become visible in the group identity expressed through dance.

The observed characteristic of the war era is the abruption of the official connections with the remaining interpersonal ones. The main Irish dancing organization – An Coimisiún Le Rincí Gaelacha has announced that "*from 24th March 2022 and until further notice, dancers from Russia will not be allowed to participate, in any way, in competitions or events, registered under the auspices of An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha*" [Official Statement from An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha 2022]. This decision has been made regardless of the code of conduct of the organization which separately distinguishes Political Neutrality status: "*An Coimisiún is a non-political organisation and shall seek to achieve its objectives and carry out its functions in a completely apolitical manner*" [An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha 2016]. This applies also to the dancers who left Russia after the start of the war or those who openly express their anti-war position.

Generally, the key for keeping the community alive is the common activities and events which allow to create shared experiences. As it has been shown in the example with COVID, they can be temporary substituted by the online format, but a complete stop of the flow of ideas and communication has a hidden threat. The social isolation of the dancers, especially the young ones from the international community might have saddening consequences, as they are missing out on the ability to meet people of different cultural backgrounds. As Arendt claims, the state of isolation and

the sense of being left out makes people the prime target for a totalitarian movement. The loss of the sense of community also leads to the loss of self-identity [Arendt 1973]. According to the concept of multiple identities, they might rank within each individual. For many dancers the "Me-dancer" aspect is the prevailing one. Among the 116 replies in the survey show that when continuing the phrase "Dancing to me is..." shows that only 8 identified it as purely "*sport*". Among the popular replies was: "*it's my life*" or "*an integral part of life*", "*way of self-fulfillment*", "*family*" [Google survey 2022]. The inability to be a part of the community life creates the sense of isolation, both physical and emotional.

Not being amidst the war zone and having the illusion of the 'normal' life the replies to the "*Has the war affected my dancing life?*" vary from "*not really*" to "*my dancing life has lost its direction*" [Google survey 2022]. At the same time, some note the trend "*that the Russian community of Irish dancers is becoming more united in the process of solving common problems*" [Google survey 2022]. Despite the seemingly positive dynamic of bringing people together it also brings to the table the issue of "us / them", often characterized by putting labels with "them" becoming even more so alienized. The loss of the link with the bigger international community is seen as "insignificant" only by 2 respondents out of 116. Among other replies we see:

> "*< it is> important, because it expands the boundaries in my head*"; "*<It means> to be a free person*"; "*The most valuable thing is that people from this field, who have done a lot for its development, share their knowledge and experience with you. It is a sense of community and value in what you do*"; "*It's important because dancing and art in general are things that unite people and knowing that in almost any country you could find like-minded crazy dancers was a great motivation to continue doing it*" [Google survey 2022].

54% of the respondents claimed that now they experience the sense of isolation from the international community.

However, the interpersonal connections and friendships that had been created in the pre-war time remain strong: "*As we've been told, Irish dance has never been a weapon in war*" [Google survey 2022]. Even though the dance teachers cannot travel with workshops, and the dancers are not allowed to take part in competitions, the communication remains in the online sphere. The interpersonal style of communication in not always aligned with agenda of the official discourse.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to come back to my initial research questions and briefly outline the results of the findings. The purpose of the current study was to explore the concept of **detachment** and its effect on the community of Irish dance

practitioners. The dancing community, which is normally shaped by the shared activities, has the inner driving force of maintaining these connections even in the times of detachment. This could be seen in the example of the pandemic years, when the new ways of expressing creativity were discovered. As an example, the proactive adaptation to the new realia, has transformed Festival style into a more global phenomenon. Through this process the dancers may experience the sense of belonging to a bigger and supporting community. Without being present in the same space, dancers experience the sense of unity through relation to the common art form and working on joined artistic projects. The social aspect of dance for some practitioners comes to the forefront (as the respondents refer to it, "*The reason why I'm actually doing this for*", and "*They play a bigger role than feises (competitions)*", "*Breath of fresh air*") [Google survey 2022]. The example of COVID-19 showed the positive dynamics in the sense of emotional connection and community building even when facing the spacial distance. However, the speed of breaking of the social connections is close to instant, as it has been shown in the example of war time. Though this rupture happens predominantly at the institutional level, the interpersonal relationships (if people priorly had had some personal contact) remain untacked.

The second aim of this study was to investigate the ways of forging multiple identities, as dance gives the opportunity to experience multiple ones. The inability to reach the full dance potential at the time of self-isolation has created a lot of uncertainty and pushed the practitioners to go off the beaten track. Once again, the dancing community has played an important role by expressing support and going through the trying times as one unity. Conversely, the inability to be a full member of it might cause the crisis of community belonging. Simultaneously, the propaganda machine receives more power behind the shut doors, drawing the unambiguous image of "us" versus "them". The social aspect of dance has a great influence both on the emotional wellbeing of each individual, and on the worldview of the practitioners having the ability of broadening the vision of the world: "*Almost everyone in our dance community are pacifists. Including teenage kids who get a ton of propaganda at school. It's amazing for me and it gives hope*" [Google survey 2022]. Dance creates opportunity to express resistance and freedom through our bodies by linking people from completely different backgrounds and opening the ways for a deep artistic dialogue.

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BUFFER FRINGE PERFORMING ARTS FESTIVAL: CREATING AND CURATING BEYOND THE LIMINAL FRAGILITY OF BUFFER ZONES IN CYPRUS

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Abstract

The Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festival was born out of the contested and fragile space in between border lines, the buffer zone in Nicosia, Cyprus. This paper will address the Festival's enactment of a new understanding of affective space that can enable resistance and co-creation beyond the liminality of a post-conflict buffer zone (in Nicosia and beyond) through the pandemic in 2020–2021, and 2022. As we will explore the Festival's role in creating dialogue between the space and narrative layers of melancholia and nostalgia beyond the rupture that the division has produced through collaborative and process-based approaches, we will unpack the role art and co-creation can play at a moment and a space of transition to produce alternative affective agency. Within an already contested geography, 2020 brought along the pandemic and the closure of crossing points in Cyprus which paused all planned activity and demonstrated the fragility of contact between communities and artists, whilst simultaneously producing new possibilities. Buffer Fringe 2020 was one of the few artistic platforms in Cyprus and globally to have adapted and materialized a hybrid festival, while also developing interdisciplinary and innovative methodologies. Encouraging a decolonizing agenda and embedding creativity into a social process, the paper also looks into the public space intervention in the recently opened part of Famagusta in 2021, consequently touching upon the collective curatorial approach

of the Festival in 2022 as embodiments of a new understanding of space that can enable resistance and co-creation beyond liminal fragility.

Keywords: *post-conflict buffer zones, performing arts festival, liminal fragility, affective agency, pandemic, curation.*

Introduction

Since its establishment in 2014, the Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festival laid the ground for a creative, critical, and performative space with consistent presence across the divide in Cyprus. In this paper, we will address the Festival's role in producing an alternative space generated by curation and creation beyond the liminality of a post-conflict buffer zone, through the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, as well as the recovery in 2022. Notwithstanding, the split created by the isolation caused by the pandemic, was a moment of questioning and perseverance, which produced different possibilities that are addressed in this paper. The Festival developed interdisciplinary and innovative methodologies which enabled exploring the relationship between arts, resistance, liminal fragility, and alternative affective agency by investing in collaborative, process-based approaches and alternative forms of curation and creation. Encouraging a decolonizing agenda, in this paper, we have explored the potential of a liminal time and space to become a ground in reimagining affective agency as a reflexive process through the Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festivals of 2020–2021, and 2022.

Embedding creativity into a sociocultural process, how can we trace the relationship between liminality, affect, and alternative agency through a fringe festival that started from a post-conflict buffer zone? For this, in this paper we have first explored how a buffer zone gains an affective dimension through a festival. Following on, as one of the few artistic platforms in Cyprus and globally to have adapted and materialized a festival despite the Covid-19 pandemic, we have focused on how the festival responded to the pandemic. Consequently, the paper looks into how the performances from the 2020, 2021 festival iterations and the 2022 collective curatorial approach of the festival produce a space of resistance and co-creation beyond liminal fragility.

A Festival of Buffer Zones: Liminal Reimaginings

The buffer zone is the space between the two ceasefire lines in Cyprus, running through the island from east to west. The buffer zone was drawn (for the most part) in 1974. The part of the buffer zone referred to in this article is the area called *Ledra Palace*, which has been under UN control and marked with barricades and intercommunal fighting since the late 1950s. In contrast with most of the buffer

zones, Ledra Palace has been an active space from its birth to the present. With the once-grand Ledra Palace Hotel being used as a UN Exchange point and living quarters for the UN Peacekeeping force, the space has been used to exchange war prisoners and detainees throughout periods of violence and tension. In its more recent history, Ledra Palace was the first crossing point to have opened in 2003, giving access to the majority of the inhabitants of Cyprus to cross from one side to the other. The buffer zone is a function of the spatiality of the nation-state structure and the violent conflict that resulted in the island's division and cannot be separated from the mechanisms that resulted in its creation. However, it also does not belong to any side, community, or individual, rendering it an irregular and fluid space.

Taking on from Turner's conceptualizations on liminality, Bhabha [2004: 1–7] argues that the *beyond* is a contested and uncertain space, where people go against structures and hegemonies and act upon spaces where they negotiate different narratives and identities within the postcolonial condition. The Festival aimed to create a space *beyond* where artists and audiences could negotiate essentialist notions of identity, home and division that are part and parcel of the Cypriot postcolonial condition. Since 2019, the themes of the Festival questioned in-between spaces, displacement, and pockets (beyond) respectively. These themes have aimed to create an enunciative split *where contradictory discourses overlap and discrepant kinds of meaning-making converge* [Tsing 1994: 279]. Notwithstanding, it is not the buffer zone in itself that is a liminal space; rather, liminality becomes possible through contact, creative production, disruption, and questioning of divisive, monophonic, and dominant narratives and discourses that are produced from this transitional moment and space. In Rosaldo's terms [1993: 207–208], we conceptualize the buffer zone as a borderland, as a site of creative cultural production that requires investigation. Tracing this borderland as a liminal moment connects the traumatic ambivalences of personal, psychic history to the broader disjunctions of political and everyday existence that has divided Cyprus. For Edward Said [1993], a *contrapuntal crack*[1] emerges from the communities that question the normalized everyday understanding, and dominant, divisive narratives. Framing liminal rupture as a *contrapuntal crack*, we conceptualize affective agency as a cross-corporeal cohabitation that sutures the psychic and the discursive. This then allows interpreting the notes in-between different positionalities, melancholia and nostalgia, displacement, and unhomeliness through the performing arts Festival from a borderland.

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[1] The term 'contrapuntal' has been coined by Edward W. Said [1993] in *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage. Said refers to things that cannot be reduced to homophony, focusing our attention on numerous identities, the polyphony of many voices that can be heard at the same time. A contrapuntal understanding has been useful for us to critically reflect on our positionality and consider self-reflexivity as a critical informative tool.

In the process of framing the space and context, the need has emerged to explore its narrative layers, including *trauma* and *melancholia*, which Khanna [2003] analyses in relation to the colonized nation/community rather than approaching it on an individual basis. According to Freudian theory, melancholia refers to the subject's inability to successfully assimilate loss; however, for Khanna, *colonial disavowal* also works as a form of melancholia for subjects of colonized states [2003: 167]. Traces of what could not be mourned following colonialism, according to Khanna [2003], can lead to a form of critical agency where the spectral emerges as affect addressing the incapacity to introject the obsolete ideal of nation-statehood in the postcolonial era. For Abraham and Torok in Khanna [2003], this incorporation can be glimpsed in language and transferred intergenerationally, finding embodiment at particular historical intersections stimulated by specific incidents through performative acts and narratives.

The buffer zone's irregularity and fluidity enable it to embody governmentality but also resistance through the insertion of activism, affect, and artistic creativity which becomes possible through programs such as the Buffer Fringe Festival that questioned division and aimed to decolonize narratives, histories, and stories.[1] As Berger [2003] also underlines, resistance is not just to reject political and ideological lies but instead, it is also to create awareness of these lies which can find embodiment via art. Exploring the matter of radical political agency through affect involves, as Hynes and Sharpe contend, *bodies and minds from the point of view of their capacities or powers... oriented not to what the mind and body should do, but to the always indeterminate question of what they can do* [Hynes and Sharpe 2009: 4].

The Festival enabled complex positionalities of curators and artists to engage with new creative frameworks. The opening of the Home for Cooperation in 2011 and the Buffer Fringe Festival in 2014, produced not only the possibility of a new space and institution emerging from the buffer zone, but the possibilities for arts funding to conduct an entirely new type of work: *arts for conflict transformation*, within the former zone of violent conflict. This included the institutional funding for the Home for Cooperation, which also partly funded the Festival, from the EEA Grants, powered by the governments of Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein[2], as well as international academic institutions and organizations that supported the artistic and educational work of the Festival. On this line, in this article by focusing on

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[1] Relevant articles: Evangelou, E. (2018). 'Theatre Beyond Nationalism: Participatory Art in the Cyprus Buffer Zone' & Ioannidou, E., Christodoulou, V., & Evangelou, E. (2022). 'From ethnography to performance: transforming interview narratives into artistic performative acts – The project 'Greco' at the Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festival'.

[2] Additional information can be found at: https://eeagrants.org/archive/2014-2021/projects/CY-CIVILSOCIETYPDPs-0001

several performances and processes from the 2020, 2021 and 2022 editions of the Buffer Fringe Festival, we explore the potential of the Festival to produce a space of affective agency and collective resistance that enabled artists, organizers and audiences to question and reimagine the past in a way that also makes peace with the present.

We start with the lecture performance *History Lesson*, by Argyro Nicolaou from the 2020 Festival. The Performance explored the relationship between historical memory and nostalgia, finding embodiment through the critical onlook of Cyprus-related films. The artist explored the affective relationship of the perception of identity through the nostalgia of the moving image, in relation to nationalist and post-colonial visual references. Following on, the performance we focus on from the 2021 Buffer Fringe, creates a crack through the politics of memory taking place in the forcefully abandoned town of Varosha following its opening to public visitors after 48 years. The *95 Stops*, tech-enabled performative promenade through the city, was an intersection between geography and memory, as it was based on testimonies, manifesting a system of power relations and political violence that stem from, but extend beyond Varosha. Time and place are negotiated through the performance, creating a crack that strikes through memory and experience for the participant, creating the possibility for the present to intrude into the past. Finally, through the 2022 edition of the Festival, it seems that the process to turn the festival into an *an artist-based conflict transformation festival* as suggested by Perlman and Moiseos [2023], was completed, with the introduction of collaborative practices in the heart of the organization of the festival itself, thus extending the possibilities of festival-making.

Before 2003, there was no possibility that the authors of this paper could meet in Cyprus, as one of them comes from the southern part of the green line and the other from the northern part of the green line. The opening of the crossings was a moment of joy, surprise, and questioning. As we returned to Cyprus after studies abroad, it was not the fetish of a liberating, utopian buffer zone that pulled us to co-create from this space. Still, it was the need for a critical stance not only to question political violence, dispossession and the effects of imperial politics but also to explore our own relationship with these power dynamics that we have been raised with. This in-between or beyond space to question, co-create, sustain solidarity and decolonize brings about a *contrapuntal awareness* in Edward Said's terms [1993], almost like a double vision to also make peace with what we have inherited as post memories. It answers where you start decolonizing the past, present, and future. It is our intertwined and, at the same time disjunctive stories and perspectives through our utterances of checkpoint or border, Famagusta, Varosia or Varosha, that a liminal rupture becomes possible.

As one feels that the standing ground is not the home to which one can ever return or fully occupy while still feeling deeply for it, a constant mode of questioning and a sense of insecurity about one's relationship to place and memory, to past and present can be generated. Bhabha [1994] puts out the concept of *unhomely* by alluding to various works of postcolonial literature that critically approach the idea of a true and stable *home*. According to Bhabha [1994], the space between the *heimlich* (homely) and the *unheimlich* (unhomely) is a postcolonial space in which one can understand how a person's identity is a combination of what is alien and familiar. This concept is similar to Freud's approach as, according to Freud [1919 [2001]], an uncanny moment is produced when the subconscious slips into the conscious. The same thing happens when the outside world penetrates the *home* and disrupts an identity perceived as stable. Alienation can be an excruciating pain as it is not familiar. However, according to Bhabha [1994], the alienation that individual experiences during the *unhomely* moment may also provide an opportunity to rethink one's identity. Through our layered positionality as artists, academics and curators, Greek-speaking and Turkish-speaking Cypriots, living and approaching the buffer zone from its opposite sides, we have tried to further unfold the *unhomeliness* of our positionalities, the festival, and the performances to explore their connection with a past in conflict, a divided present and alternative affective agency.

Framing the Context

Understanding the micro space of the Buffer Zone in Cyprus also requires understanding the sociocultural context and history it is located in. The island, resting in the very east of the Mediterranean seas, was part of the Ottoman Empire from 1571–1878 and served as a bridge from the administrative centre (Constantinople/Istanbul) to the Middle East and North Africa. With the transition from Ottoman rule to British colonial rule starting in 1878, Cyprus and its largely uneducated (mostly) rural population was governed as a British colony and exploited for its natural resources. In the rural and urban communities, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Maronites, Armenians, Jews, and other ethnic and religious groups lived in both mixed and homogeneous communities.

Through the British colonial period, several critical socio-cultural changes emerged; among them was the rise of nationalism in various population groups, with the transposition of religious affiliation to national affiliation, with Orthodox Christians and Muslims becoming Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots. As British colonial rule in Cyprus neared its end in the 1950s, Greek and Turkish Cypriots were already split. From 1955, with its official beginning, the Greek-Cypriot military group EOKA employed guerrilla warfare in its anti-colonial agenda, which included the central claim for the unification of Cyprus with Greece (*enosis*), while the

Turkish-Cypriots, and their armed group, TMT, advocating for *taksim*, or division, as a means of opposition to Greek-Cypriots.[1]

Despite internal tensions, the Republic of Cyprus was established in 1960, unifying Turkish and Greek Cypriots under a single sovereign entity. Tensions between the two groups began early, resulting in the Turkish Cypriots' withdrawal from the government in 1963, the creation of Turkish-Cypriot enclaves and the sporadic-yet-consistent violence between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, until 1974, a landmark year in its recent history. The events of this year culminated in the emergence of the present status quo, with the separation of the island into two parts and the segregation of its population. A military coup incited by the Greek junta on July 15 created chaos on the island, with the ensuing armed invasion[2] of Turkish troops (starting on July 20 and continuing throughout August 1974) splitting the island in two. Once a ceasefire was agreed, the line dividing the island included the capital Nicosia from east to west. According to Zetter [1994], 180,000 Greek Cypriots had to move to the southern part of the Green Line, whereas according to Ozersay and Gurel [2006], 65,000 Turkish Cypriots were displaced to the northern part of the Green Line. Conversely, migration of *agricultural labour* from Turkey to Northern Cyprus was encouraged, with initiatives fostering Turkish migration to the island continuing from 1975 until 1979. Villages that had sought internal migration within Turkey, primarily owing to socioeconomic and environmental issues, were forced to relocate to north Cyprus and were reinstated in housing and lands left by displaced Greek Cypriots. Despite continued talks at the political level from the late 1970s onwards, the two sides developed and nurtured separate narratives of identity and remembering, using the division as a political tool to this end. The crossing points that had been closed since 1974 reopened in 2003, with Ledra Palace opening first and six more following since then. Many Cypriots returned to visit their homes, and many crossed to see how the 'other' side of their country looked after 30 years of segregation. Currently, 20 years after the opening, the ceasefire conditions continue with no significant steps in the resolution process.

According to Green [2010], unresolved political border concerns can cause individuals to feel as if their daily lives have come to a halt until the issue is solved,

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[1] The relationship between Cyprus with Greece and Turkey, as well as the development of nationalism, is analyzed in the following book: Aktar, A., KizilyüreK, N., and Özkirimli, U. (2010). *Nationalism in the troubled triangle: Cyprus, Greece and Turkey*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

[2] Discourses about the military operation in 1974 vary depending on the actors. A comprehensive analysis can be found in the chapter entitled "A Critical Comparison of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot Official Historiographies (1940s to the Present)", by Mete Hatay and Yiannis Papadakis, in the edited volume: Bryant, R., and Papadakis, Y. (2012). *Cyprus and the politics of memory: History, community and Conflict*. London: I.b.tauris.

which becomes a defining feature of their everyday life. Reflecting on the situation in Cyprus, with the permanent impermanence of the Buffer Zone, Bryant states:

> *The limen in "liminality" is considered as a threshold, and to be at the limen refers to being caught in between one state of being and another, having permanent liminal status refers to the state of being stuck between the political form the entity once was and the recognized body politic it wishes to become* [2014: 126].

Reflecting on the situation in Cyprus, with the permanent impermanence of the buffer zone, Bryant [2014: 133] continues to state that, *if liminality is a transition stage, it is unknown what stage will follow that*. This makes liminality appear indefinite, the future uncertain. Memory in Cyprus, just like many other spaces, has been politicized as a wound, embodied in the rupture of division and in personal suffering. Rebecca Bryant [2012: 340] contends that when the future emerges as a threshold of anticipation, past wounds come to allude to both a predicted violence and to a moment when the wounds would be healed. In this sense, former suffering is part of the present, not to mourn the dead or leave the past behind but to settle histories still disputed. As a consequence, while the border harbouring the *other* was disrupted by the opening of crossing points in 2003, the border as a construct of suffering remained stable. As a result, Bryant [2012: 358] proposes seeing the *wound* on the body politic as a *threshold of anticipation*, pointing to both a former cause of pain and a future *healing* which should first restructure the present. The present, on the other hand, remains liminal. Therefore, in perspective, we might infer that creating peace necessitates a political resolution but most importantly a significant restructuring of the present.

A Festival of Innovation

The year 2019, constitutes the beginning of a circle of investigation and thought around the buffer zone as a space and its contentedness, as that emerged through the themes selected and implemented in the work of the Festival. The 2019 festival, curated for the first time by dramaturge and scholar Ellada Evangelou, proposed through the theme of *Defining the Buffer Zone* to stimulate processes of decolonization of the space by inviting artists to respond to this question, as per Spivak's famous words, to allow *the Subaltern to speak* [1988: 271]. For the first time in decades, artists from Cyprus and across the world were asked to define the space in-between. The concept of the Buffer Fringe 2020 and 2021, shifted to the experience of mobility, local and international, and it was encapsulated in one word: *Displacement*. In a series of questions that served to open up the conversation, the Festival artists responded to how they understood mobility *as an experience of people, ideas, and practices, in their own reality or that of others?* [Home for Cooperation

website 2020]. The theme was decided before the beginning of the pandemic, but it found (and in a way, extended) its meaning throughout the 2020 and 2021 iterations of the Festival. The concept, as it was first developed pre-COVID, considered Cyprus as a geographical and socio-political space, which was for an entire century framed by histories of violence, colonial dispossession, and imperial politics where the mourning of displacement and dispossession can be traced across generations. As the globe moved into lockdowns and isolation, the buffer zone manifested itself through a new fragility, as the crossing points closed even earlier than airports, including the crossing point of Ledra Palace where the Home for Cooperation sits and where the Festival takes place (for the most part).

In that sense, *Displacement* as the theme of a fringe festival that stems out of a fragile border area certainly carried deeper meanings and outcomes as the healing and resisting power of artistic expression created a discontinuous crack to explore the role of memory, remembering, and nostalgia. In this context, liminal fragility led to a disruption, a crack in our understanding of time and space. In this context, going ahead with the festival meant actively resisting notions of liminality as those were formulated during the period of segregation, but also during the 2004–2020 period of contact, whereby the liminal space of the buffer zone is ruptured. New methodologies and interdisciplinary tools explore the relationship between arts and alternative agency and propose new ruptures through acts of redefining affect through solidarity and collaboration. The remaining paper explores how this process took place during 2020 and 2021, and, even post-pandemic, through the 2022 festival.

The concept of festivals as liminal, transitory spaces and experiences has been widely explored by Turner [1969, 1974, 1982]. For Turner [1982], through a festival, individuals can create or be part of a space where they can disengage from the norms of society and their everyday identities. Buffer Fringe Festival's audience throughout the three editions reflected a community that came together through ideological and artistic motivation. The Festival mainly attracted local and glocal communities from both sides of the divide who identify as Cypriots and question the divisive, dominant political discourses and narratives as well as international artists, researchers and like-minded individuals. Turner [1974] proposes three distinct forms of communitas related to liminality: *spontaneous, ideological, and normative*. The concept of *ideological communitas* addresses collective perspectives and ideas that breakdown conventional social narratives and structures that can give rise to alternative perspectives. In this sense, we can posit that the Festival has created an *ideological communitas* which provided its audiences with a platform to question, express and resist the current political stalemate and division in Cyprus. This transcends the peripheral and transitory narratives and embodies a more enduring and profound connection based on mutual values.

The theme for Buffer Fringe 2022 was *Pockets (beyond)*, which aimed to spark a discussion on who is visible or invisible and why. This theme explored differences of identity, past and present, inclusion and exclusion, transferring agency back to the marginalized and forgotten individuals. As the open call suggested,

> *The pocket in question is a pocket of resistance against the inhumanity of the new world order and a place where we keep things we need or love: pockets contain and hide things, yet they also keep them close to us. What pockets contain may also be traces and remnants of the past that stay alive in the stitches that keep the pocket together. In that sense, a pocket may look like a blind spot but blind spots resist the logic of the main frame and go beyond expected ways of seeing* [Home for Cooperation website 2022].

Beyond implied a disruptive movement, a different direction, it promised the future while acknowledging a sense of disorientation brought by the precarity of our times. It aimed to explore whether a pocket could be an alternative space for living and creating. The inquiry delved into identifying and examining our blind spots and questioning dominant notions of culture, race, sexuality, as well as environmental and human crises through the lens of art. The goal was also to encourage an exploration of the intersection of everyday life and art and empower artists to challenge, and puncture established power structures. Ultimately, this process aimed to highlight the agency we have as individuals and as a collective to pose these crucial questions.

Displacement During the Pandemic-2020

Following a period of complete lockdown with discussions on whether the 2020 Festival could take place and how, the Artistic Director and the Festival team proposed three new principles that would make collective creation possible, which were the process and collaboration-based methodologies and the *Thinking Partners program*. The process-based methodology meant that the festival would not only host the work of the artists if/when that would be possible in a physical space, but it would also showcase their creative process. Artists and artist groups shared their weekly updates presenting their work which were then shared through the Festival blog and social media. For the *Thinking Partners program*, the Festival partnered with IMPACT (Imagining Together Platform for Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation) of Brandeis University to provide participating artists with a *Thinking Partner*, a person who would work closely with the artists, to advise them and support them throughout their creative process. The program's engagement with a thinking partner was based on the idea that oftentimes, *we need another brain to think together with* [Buffer Fringe website 2022].

The Thinking Partners (TPs) initiative connected people from various regions and fields of knowledge with artists and artist teams to work together. Throughout the preparation process for the performances, the TPs maintained close contact with the artists to foster critical dialogues about the creative practice and the *arts for conflict transformation field* in general. The Buffer Fringe's local artist and cultural networks, as well as IMPACT's global connections to arts practitioners, researchers, and culture workers active in the arts for conflict transformation field, were used to find TPs. As a result, the TPs came from all over the world, including Cyprus, Argentina, Serbia, Netherlands, and others. The project aimed to invest in artists and the rigor of the creative process it supported to contribute to the creation of an artist development plan that may be duplicated in the arts for conflict transformation sphere.

Buffer Fringe Festival 2020 was one of the few festivals that decided to produce a *hybrid festival model*. These included primarily *live* performances in Cyprus, such as performances and installations in Cyprus with in-person audiences when feasible despite pandemic limitations. The activities were live-streamed online via the Buffer Fringe Facebook page and website, as well as through other virtual platforms of groups collaborating with the 2020 Festival. The entire Festival included 28 local and international artists, with nine performances, two installation pieces, two virtual discussions, and one online international academic conference. Four of the nine performances were presented live in front of an audience in Cyprus, while the others were live-streamed in Cyprus and two in New York from the Gallatin Galleries at NYU.[1]

According to Perlman and Moiseos [2023], the Buffer Fringe Festival is one of the most prominent initiatives of the Home for Cooperation, which explicitly promotes a multi-communal agenda and is associated with the pro-reunification and bi-communal Cypriot civil society and the diplomatic community. On the other hand, the Buffer Fringe Festival 2020 conveyed an alternative set of sensibilities in its approach to facing and trying to transform the Cyprus conflict, with its questioning approach to conventional bi-communal practices and its very intentional decision to select displacement as the festival's theme. For Pearlman and Moiseos [2023], instead of providing a solution, the Buffer Fringe Festival 2020 utilized the space created by the festival to question the conflict and division to develop a more thorough and critical comprehension of it by choosing performances that attempt to comprehend the historical roots of conflict and division. Although the term *problematization* is commonly used in other contexts, such as critical thinking and pedagogical dialogue in educational circles and social science studies, for Pearlman and Moiseos [2023], BFF 2020's approach could also be described as *problematizing the conflict* in the

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[1] More information can be found on the NYU Gallatin Galleries website.

framework of arts, culture, and transformation of conflict. Buffer Fringe 2020 evoked feelings and honest exploration where repeated traumas and ongoing oppressions have resulted in numbness and silencing; it nourished capacities to embrace the paradox and ambiguity that characterize complexity.

In this part, through tracing one of the 2020 performances, we will attempt to connect the traumatic ambivalences of personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of the colonial and political context. *History Lesson* by Argyro Nicolaou was an interdisciplinary performance that took place in 2020. As Nicolaou could not come to Cyprus from New York due to the pandemic, she performed at the Gallatin Galleries, and her performance was live-streamed. The performance took place as a lecture and, in Nicolaou's terms, explored *the intergenerational effects of internal displacement and the inchoate histories they produce* [Home for Cooperation website 2020]. The performance used films shot in Cyprus before 1974 which are not commonly known in Cyprus for being shot in Cyprus, like *Exodus* (1960, starring Paul Newman), *Sin* (1971, starring Rachel Welch), and *Ghost in the Noonday Sun* (1974). Nicolau underlined in the description of her performance that she utilized these films *to learn about the other side*, patching in the blanks that followed her refugee mother's past by developing an alternative history course of Cyprus. Through the performance, Nicolaou questioned mainstream conceptions of Cypriot history moulded by the country's colonial past, inviting students to question what concepts such *as Island, Anatolia, natives, and settlers* mean, which are still crucial debates for the communities of Cyprus. She invited the audience for a *historical un-looking* through moments that created a blank hole in the history of the island and our memory.

As Nicolaou questioned the colonial past of the island as the history teacher, the authority figure who talks to her students, displaced histories found embodiment in the slippery delay between the sound and the vision of her performance as technical issues faced in New York and Nicosia led to gaps and delays between the sound and the vision of her performance. In Homi Bhabha's [1994: 36] terms, we want to question whether this slippery delay can be perceived as an *enunciative split* that enables the cultural analysis of any narrative via a temporal discontinuity. Considering this slippery ground as an *enunciative split* would, in turn, allow us to question the relationship between alternative affective agency and what nationalist politics and mechanisms of remembering and forgetting have obscured. As Nicolaou shares her process of creating an alternative history class, she notes:

> *We acknowledge that these foreign images carry the stain and legacy of colonialism (including the well-rehearsed tropes of Orientalism) but we are adamant that they are also invaluable sources and tools, bearing in mind how little we know, and how little we have at our disposal. Why should we not re-appropriate*

these images, re-claim them, use them against their original intentions of painting a false picture of the island, and instead put them to use in crafting a history lesson that seeks truth in art and distances itself from the facts of ethnonationalism? [Home for Cooperation website 2020]

Expanding on Butler's theory on gender melancholia, focusing on Nicosia Navaro Yashin [2012] argues that when the person who has been lost is the one who belongs to the community of the so-called enemy, the loss is not symbolized as a loss and therefore is not grieved generating melancholia, a psychical subjective state in which the object of loss is mainly unconscious to the identity of the mourner as the loss lingers on. For Svetlana Boym [2001], nostalgia is a characteristic of modern time, a historical affect as it is more than just local longing but the outcome of a new perception of time and place that separates local from universal. For Boym, there are two sorts of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia emphasizes *nóstos* (home) and strives to restore the lost home over time. Reflective nostalgia treasures broken memories while devaluing space. It demonstrates that longing and critical thinking are not mutually exclusive and that affective memories do not relieve one of empathy, judgement, or critical thinking. According to Boym [2001], reflective nostalgia has elements of grief and melancholia. While the loss is not fully understood, it is associated with the loss of collective frameworks of memory, which results in a deep mourning that works via pain reflection towards the future. In that sense, by focusing on the connection between the performance and its relation to collective memory, can we question whether post-conflict melancholia is leaving itself to reflective nostalgia? When historical memory gets enmeshed with nostalgia and finds embodiment through art, it seems to create a space to mourn over what the politics of nationalism has concealed, which in societies like Cyprus, could help face a past that has not been really pondered upon and generate alternative affective agency.

Unpacking Displacement from a Town in Ruins-2021

The Festival was held amid the global health crisis for a second year in 2021, attracting 59 artists from twelve countries with 16 performances and events over three full days, powered by 22 collaborations with local and international organizations. In cooperation with The Festival Academy and supported by the IMPACT (Platform for Arts, Culture, and Conflict Transformation), Buffer Fringe 2021 hosted a Hybrid Forum on Festivals and creative events and performances. During the Forum, festival practitioners, stakeholders in the performing arts, and artists worldwide discussed the role of festivals and creativity in conflict transformation. These approaches were critical in allowing creatives to analyze their experiences on their terms and in their own time during such a fragile period as the pandemic.

The performance we have focused on in this part of the article is *95 Stops+*. Buffer Fringe's collaboration with artists from Limassol and Famagusta (two cities that have a high number of displaced people) began in 2020 with Elena Agathokleous from MITOS Center for Performing Arts and Nurtane Karagil, a Famagusta-based artist using an arcade that has been renovated by the artist community around it namely Magusa Kale Pasajı, a community space in the medieval city of Famagusta. Through the performance, the concept of displacement was intended to be transformed from a negative to a positive connotation, and it was thus treated as humans' ability to communicate ideas that are remote in time and space, as a new opportunity to discover a new dynamic such as the possibility of feeling connected and at home.

In 2020, Elena designed a virtual map with 95 spots worth stopping-feeling-listening-learning-hearing in along the 95 km distance between Limassol and Famagusta. In 2021, the collaboration grew to include Famagusta New Museum [FNM]. Founded in 2016 by Yiannis Toumazis, FNM is an active platform that strives to reactivate the abandoned city of Varosha in the social, cultural, and political fields through its programs and events. FNM's motto is *I Understand and Forgive the Past; I Love and Generate the Future* [FNM website]. The organization aspires to awaken citizens by facilitating public conversation and developing artistic participation and activist interventions. Varosha, once a prosperous resort town in Cyprus, was fenced off after its 30,000 Greek-Cypriot inhabitants had to leave within a few days following the Turkish army's dominance over the area in August of 1974. The UN Security Council in 1984 declared that any settlement effort in Varosha by people other than its rightful inhabitants would be illegal. The town's future was placed on the negotiating table early in the talks to solve the Cyprus conflict, giving its displaced residents the idea that they would return to their homes. The town was partially opened to the public on October 8, 2020, after it had been under Turkish military rule, with substantial parts locked off since August 1974. As dark tourism took off, the town became a photo shoot background for new visitors, whereas, for the old inhabitants, memories of the past resurged.

The performance in the context of Buffer Fringe 2021 consisted of an audio walk where artists Nurtane Karagil and Yiannis Toumazis aimed to launch a sensory experience through a geolocated sound map via the ECHOES application in Varosha. The team created a geolocated audio tour through the sound map that serves as a self-guided tour that guides the listener to walk around different parts of Varosha by listening to the memories of Yiannis, who was forced to leave his home in Varosha in 1974. The sound map materialized in an artistic intervention on the second day of the Buffer Fringe Festival in 2021 as the Festival audience walked across Varosha guided by the team and the map. Through this intervention, the audience was invited

to re-imagine and reconnect the town in ruins with its stories and memories that transform the remaining ruins into a town that once belonged to people. For Svetlana Boym [2017], ruins compel us to think about the past that could have taken place and a future that may have eventuated.

The walk starts with Toumazis clarifying that they used to call the town Famagusta or Varosi and continues with his school: Saint John Elementary School. The audience reimagines the school, the municipal cafe, Demokratias Avenue, and the Kypseli Pastry shop through Toumazis' 14-year-old eyes. He recalls every detail: who lived where, where to obtain the best spinach pie, and which store sold what. His memories reactivate the space, and the walk reconnects him to his childhood. He continues,

> We can not visit my house, but we can see it from the wall... I remember the private diary that I was hiding behind my books... I was writing some very personal stuff in there. Hopefully, it was burnt during a bombardment or something...[1] [95+ Stops ECHOES App].

Through the walk, Toumazis is transported back to his childhood and adolescence, and memories of that period surface. For Boym [2001], nostalgia was privatized and internalized throughout the twentieth century, shifting yearning for home into longing for one's youth. As one feels that the standing ground is not the home to which one can ever return while still feeling deeply for it, a constant mode of questioning can lead to an alternative layering of narratives. Nostalgia for Boym [2001] is a yearning for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. While the actual trauma is never fully recollected, it appears that the element of nostalgia in the process of remembering results in the unhomely rupturing of the present. When sharing her feelings about the creative process, Nurtane, who grew up on the outskirts of Famagusta, wrote 'how fascinating is the concept of *Don't forget / Δεν ξεχνώ is in the south, engraved in every school text-book of our childhood, and how it contrasts with the welcoming sign in the northern checkpoints: "The Turkish Republic of Cyprus FOREVER," as if the two sides play these memory games – is it a curse never to forget or the curse is to forget forever?* [FNM website]. The following quote connects the past with the present in a rather unsettling manner for the narrator:

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[1] His narrative continues: "I remember we were at the orange grounds in Ayios Memnon, where my grandfather had his orange grove and house... We were all digging holes in the dirt to be protected from huge bombs. First, we saw two white spots in the air; then you heard a terrible aircraft noise and the explosions from the bombs... I remember the worms crawling on my hands because we were digging in the ground, and I remember thinking oh, this is how it feels when human corpses decay because of the worms that eat them."

This shop was selling the latest sound equipment at the time. I remember the apricot cake; it was amazing... Here we bought all our English books... Republic Avenue, or Democracy Avenue, was the most commercial street, with galleries, cinemas, and shops... It is also a very important spot here for me because after Famagusta opened and when I came here, I saw one of the most dreadful images... I saw a newlywed couple, probably from Turkey, taking their wedding photographs in front of my uncle's looted house. I felt really ashamed of that... [ECHOES App].

How can we make sense of couples and young people who come to the town in ruins for photoshoots? One may argue that it is tied to ignorance, apathy, and memory politics, which legitimizes the presence of the de-facto state in the north. Yet, could it have a more profound, visceral link with the aspiration of being a member of the global world, the perceived lack of agency due to political non-recognition for the communities who live in Northern Cyprus, as Hatay and Bryant [2021] argue, the colonial past, and the ideals of modernity? During an interview, Melek, who had her wedding photographs taken in Varosha, suggested:

I used to hear about Varosha from my grandparents all the time. I live in a village about 20 minutes from the area, so we always went near to catch a glimpse. There are many stories about how the town was the richest in the Mediterranean, with the first 7-star hotel and many famous actors and actresses having houses and partying there. Now that we can walk around the town more easily, we went to take a couple of wedding pictures there; it is interesting to live close to a place that was once the center of the world. [1]

By being photographed at a place once acknowledged and appreciated by the world, could the individual feel to have agency in the world that political non-recognition denies? According to Yael Navaro [2012], Turkish Cypriots gained a newly discovered middle-class position after 1974 by acquiring homes and belongings left behind by the displaced communities and access to public employment and education opportunities in Turkey. As a result, Varosha became an almost legendary town associated with wealth, modernity, and progress in this newly established polity. Kemal, who is now in his 80s, explained:

I used to work in Varosha at a hotel construction in 1974, one day my boss asked me to go close to him and whispered not to come to work tomorrow because they would close the barricades and I would not be able to go back; I tried to protest, but he did not allow protesting, he dropped me with his car that night to a safe region. It was indeed true; the subsequent day, attacks started again. Apart from

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[1] From face-to-face interview part of Nihal Soganci's doctoral research – May 2022.

working, I had only visited Maraş (Varosha) once with my family to have ice cream on the beach; those places (referring to Varosha) were for the rich and tourists.[1]

Stoler [2013] concentrates on the remnants or vestiges of violence in their physical and material manifestations (such as ruins) and their lasting, structural, and political forms (as in postcolonial states). In that sense, could we consider these photoshoots part and parcel of the postcolonial condition following the failed *independence* that buries the imprints of colonial violence and ideals? Stoler [2013: 2] focuses on how an empire's ruins shape and cut through the emotional and physical space in which people live and what compounded layers of imperial detritus do to them. Ruins are, therefore, both things (actual material artifacts that can be identified as the detritus of empire) and metaphors (indicating colonialism's continuous impact) [Stoler 2013: 11]. Could we then, through these narratives, catch a glimpse of the intergenerational transmission of trauma and traces of colonialism and violence, as well as economic disparities that divide the communities in the first place? The unhomely moments through these performances connect the traumatic ambivalences of personal, psychic history to the broader disjunctions of political and everyday existence. Hence, it enables us to explore culture, power, political violence, and imperial amnesia as processes through which we can explore how they carve through the psychic and material space. Through this performance and interviews, we witness not just Toumazis' personal stories but also a system of power relations and political violence that extends beyond Varosha. The performance brings together layers of political, corporeal, and affective components showing us the interstices between unhomeliness and up-rootedness as implicated in affective forms. The cracks that strike through the memories form a disjunctive temporality to glimpse how the past intrudes into the present through different forms and stories.

Pockets (Beyond) and Collective Curation in 2022

The post-pandemic era demanded revisiting the curatorial model. Mainly because the insularity that the pandemic editions demanded became overbearing. Therefore, the decision was taken to embrace the social and collective responsibility to change, engage, and share – which was felt strongly from the vulnerable place of the buffer zone. As mentioned in the Manifesto, published in the Spring of 2022, together with the new theme of the Festival,

In 2022, our vision embraces a cross-cultural / cross-disciplinary / cross-generational approach, and we continue to encourage a decolonizing agenda. We are particularly

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[1] From face-to-face interview part of Nihal Soganci's doctoral research – April 2019.

concerned with the role the arts can play in addressing the fault lines of post-conflict societies. These fault lines can become hubs for activist interventions to deconstruct and decolonize the dominant divisive narratives locally and internationally. A space for sustainable solidarity. Participating in global conversations aiming to create an interdisciplinary and collaborative festival, we emerge from the Buffer Zone of Nicosia (..) [Buffer Fringe website, 2022].

The manifesto concludes by introducing the new model of creative support and curation of the festival, a system whereby multiple agencies lie at the heart of the preparation of the festival, with a team of curators and a creative coordination and consultation team. Overall leadership and coordination were carried out by Nihal Soganci and Ellada Evangelou, who were joined by five curators and the Thinking Partners team from the International Community Arts Festival of Rotterdam (ICAF). The Thinking Partners practice was reimagined as a series of group discussions between the ICAF collaborators, the BF creative team, and the five curators/three curatorial teams. The series of online discussions allowed for collective exploration of curatorial motifs, engagement with audience reception and conflict transformation in relevance with the Festival theme. The curators included Lebanese director/performer/peacebuilder Raffi Feghali, who curated the festival's first day (Friday, October 7) at *Rustem*, a colonial-era Bookstore in north Nicosia. Feghali reflected poignantly on identity and belonging in the context of history and culture and how these sentiments translate into a narrative. The second day of the festival (Saturday, October 8) was curated by a team of three; Australian Cypriot author/dramaturg Kat Kats, Australian performance director Bryce Ives, and Cypriot theatre director Maria Varnakkidou. The team's curation revolved around the creation of a queered space that expanded the agency and ability of the individual and in doing so, the community while at the same time deconstructing the black box, which was the performance space at Theatropolis in south Nicosia.

Cypriot art historian Derya Ulubatli curated the third day of the festival. Her curation of the space of Ledra Palace buffer zone and the area around the Home for Cooperation was heavily informed by the work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl and his theory of *otherness* resulting from intersubjectivity rather than isolated subjects. Ulubatli's curatorial vision sought to build a space where we can embrace all diversities and where various agents can live and produce together beyond all *identities*. In this final section of the paper, instead of exploring an artwork, we will speak about the curatorial model itself. We will focus on exploring how the politics of curation, a practice with an embedded hegemony based on the imposition of a (usually singular white and male) perspective, was deconstructed through a polyphony and a series of dialogic processes.

The decision on the names of the curators was taken by the creative team, based on several factors, first and foremost considering the relationship built and maintained with artists and cultural agents over the years, as well as artistic merit and ethical alignment. Therefore, the proposal to Raffi Feghali (Buffer Fringe artist, 2019), Kat Kats and Bryce Ives (Buffer Fringe Artists, 2020), and Maria Varnakkidou (Buffer Fringe Creative Team 2020 and 2021) were based on these criteria. In the case of Derya Ulubatli, the Festival team had approached her for a collaboration in 2021, and she was unable to work with the Festival due to other engagements.[1] She had, however, expressed her desire to collaborate with the Buffer Fringe. A publication she issued in 2022 on Art in Cyprus,[2] reignited the interest of the creative team for Ms. Ulubatli.

Starting in March 2022, the Creative Team and group of curators started to build a system of communication around working together, based on several elements: creating and sharing the timeline of the festival; having regular individual and group meetings; engaging the curators with decisions on a variety of issues, artistic and technical; framing the Thinking Partners program as a support program for the Curatorial model. In regards to the points above, we will explore two aspects of the collaboration further. The first is the involvement of the curators in the selection of venues, and the second is the recalibration of the Thinking Partners program to support the curatorial model. The selection of venues is a process that started early on in the process of organizing the festival. Venues in the south of Nicosia (TheatroPolis) and north of Nicosia (Rustem Bookstore) were secured, and the area of the Buffer Zone around the Home for Cooperation was negotiated (in terms of its use) with the UNFICYP, who is the custodian of the space.

The coordinators visited the spaces with the curators, either live or virtually through video calls. The process that led to the decision-making was organic and depended on how curators experienced the space. The first decision was taken by Raffi Feghali, who upon visiting Rustem, expressed a strong affiliation with the space: as a Lebanese of mixed Maronite and Armenian background, curating in a Turkish and English language bookstore with colonial heritage, the overlapping narratives

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[1] The contribution of Ms Ulubatli to the Festival, as a young curator coming from what politically and historically is termed as 'minority', was also seen as a continuation of the discussions taking place within scholarly and artistic circles in the Turkish Cypriot community. A reflection on the topic can be found in the following publication: Bardak, Plumer, E. 2021). From Narration to Dialogue? Thinking about the Way We Talk about Contemporary Visual Art in the Turkish Cypriot Community. In: *Contemporary Art from Cyprus: Politics, Identities, and Cultures across Borders.* Ed. Stylianou, E., Tselika, E., and Koureas, G. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, pp. 37–52. Bloomsbury Collections.

[2] Birey, T., & Ulubatli, D. (2021) *Being and Understanding the Other: A Brief Look at the 21st Century Cypriot Art.* European Mediterranean Art Association: Art for All Publications.

of oppression emerged as a strong counter to the creativity which a performing arts festival can insert in a space. This was also the line of his curatorial choices, with works that spanned from a poetic musical duo of Greek narrative and song, a queer Arab performance artist, an anti-war dance love story between two men, and a musical performance of a themed album, presenting an imaginary alternative reality by a Turkish Cypriot artist collective. The choice of venue by the curatorial team of Kat Kats, Maria Varnakkidou, and Bryce Ives was dictated by an effort to deconstruct and transfer the experience of the Cypriot diaspora to the Festival.

All three curators shared an understanding of the experience of belonging to the diaspora: Kat Kats, a second generation Australian-Cypriot, and her partner Bryce Ives, heavily influenced by the experience in his own artistic practice, and Maria Varnakkidou with a migrant family background. The deconstruction of the space, therefore, manifested itself in the intention to, firstly *queer* the space through a proposition of performances which break from the gender-conformist mainstream. also deconstructing the space of the venue, allowing performances to happen in different ways and places. The resulting program in the venue started outside the space and included a performance by a choir, a queer artist, a tech-based performance and a musical dance piece. The audience was asked to move, look up, sit down, and dance throughout the night, challenging the conventions of the classic blackbox.

The choice of Derya Ulubatli to curate the space of the Buffer Zone also came with a strong personal inclination towards installation or site-specific work. The curator, with an arts and research background on Cyprus, and an understanding of the possibilities of positioning art in a/the space, selected the space of the Buffer Zone and the Home for Cooperation. Derya aimed to place within the buffer zone, a diversity of narratives, engaging artists and audiences in dialogue and exchange. Therefore, the selected artworks were all visible and in dialogue with the space, with two installations by Cyprus-based artists in the Moat area and three performances in an outdoor stage area, in constant dialogue with the leisure area and the street/crossing area itself.

Related to the choice of venue and other crucial decisions in the curation of the overall festival, including how the creative team would work together, the Thinking Partners program created a dialogue-based support structure. Through a series of virtual meetings, the project team and members of the ICAF core organizing team (Jasmina Ibrahimovic, Anamaria Cruz, Amy Gowen) engaged in a structured dialogue, which was recorded and shared in the form of notes, and (finally) through a comprehensive report on the work carried out, including the methodology.[1] The

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[1] More information can be found at the Thinking Partners Program 2022 Report.

discussions focused on the composition and needs of the festival audiences in relation to the space and their interactions with it, as well as the possibility of affective agency in that experience. The discussions also focused on the extensions of the theme of the Festival, the idea of *space as a pocket*, and how that facilitates processes of *collective authorship* as expressed by Claire Bishop [2012]. Finally, through the conversations with the creative team and thinking partners, the Festival team contemplated on Conflict Transformation and Transcendence, with a Report on the dialogue mentioning the following:

> *The festival actively exists in this macrocosm inundated by social, political and historical contexts that exacerbate the present conflict and heavily inform the division of the greater community. In spite of this, or perhaps, because of it, Buffer Fringe acts as a catalyst for the transformation of this conflict, providing the environment in which spaces transcending these contexts can exist. It is critical to acknowledge that the cultural, historical, and political contexts that exist are not to be discounted; they are real and they carry weight in the lives of people in the community. However, this transcendence allows for the exploration of peace-building and reconciliation within a community in a conflict zone through the use of arts and culture* [Thinking Partners Program 2022 Report: 10–11].

The conversations over Zoom, as those were associated with the Buffer Fringe as a space of applied theatre practice, as per the definition provided by Shaughnessy, were *[r]esistant and transcendent* [2012: 3]. In the framework of a dialogic openness, the participants in the discussion created an incubator through which a new series of ruptures took place within the liminal space, also powered by the fact of the collective nature of the process itself. Repositioning individual affective agency for each curator vis-a-vis the spaces of their work, as well as each other and the festival as a practice, generated the type of alternative agency which in turn becomes resistant and transcends the specific place, to make a statement about the practice of curation in contested contexts overall. In their research regarding Buffer Fringe 2020, Perlman and Moiseos [2023] report that the festival falls within what they suggest, *an artist-based conflict transformation festival*. This generates extensions for the practice, both within the arts community but also for the possibilities of festival-making.

Final Reflections

In 2020, a few weeks before the Festival, rigorous testing, mask, and distancing regulations for crossings and theatre performances were announced from the authorities on both sides of the divide. Upon receiving the news, there was a lot of doubt about whether it was possible to have a face-to-face festival across the divide

as planned. After conversations within the team, Ellada got up from the meeting room and went to inform the H4C management that the Festival would still happen adhering to all measurements as required. The festival would happen as a resistance to authorities that blocked crossings before announcing any other measures, it would happen as an embodiment of resilience for all artists, audiences, and people involved who wanted to question dominant ideologies and create a space to enact an alternative understanding of the past. The action was both literal and symbolic at the moment and in hindsight.

This action comes at the foot of two decades of questioning political violence, dispossession, and the effects of imperial politics: the opening of the crossings in 2003 prompted this critical stance and allowed us to act together and explore our own relationship with these power dynamics. A performing arts festival that was born out of a buffer zone in between these crossing points, became a space of collective action, to co-create, sustain solidarity, and decolonize. The Festival has created a dialogue between the space, narrative layers of melancholia and affective agency producing liminal reimaginings beyond the rupture that the division has produced.

For Butler [2015], acting together is an embodiment that challenges dominant political perspectives as, *the claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together, or rather, when through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being* [Butler 2015: 89]. Human bodies remain a permanent and irrepressible source of resistance, resilience, and power even in the darkest times. Looking back, going ahead with the festival in 2020 despite the pandemic and the almost impossibility of crossing was indeed an act of resilience driven by affective agency. McManus [2011] posits that agency is derived from tangible experiences, specifically affective interactions that influence or activate the ability to take action. Based on Spinoza's ideas, McManus [2011] proposes that there is a connection between agential potential and psychic consciousness which resonates with our conceptualization of affective agency as a cross-corporeal cohabitation that sutures the psychic and the discursive in a performative way.

Performances and methodologies that we focused on in this article rendered visible a past that had not truly been pondered upon in the history of Cyprus, that also had a place for the other's suffering. In that sense, the performing arts festival from this particularly fragile context became a ground to create beyond the memory of absence producing a collective space of alternative affective agency. We have explored that when the memory of the past intersects with art, it can create an alternative affective space for an extent of mourning and reimagining what nationalism has obscured. Buffer Fringe 2020, 2021, and 2022 highlighted the potential of art and acting together to question dominant perspectives, be it pandemic, be it political uncertainty, and has shown resilience through art not only as a performing arts festival

but also as a performative form of power that creates the ground to deconstruct and decolonize dominant divisive narratives.

Without effective reconciliation processes that address these dynamics critically, any *peacebuilding* effort risks becoming a victim of the power systems and governmentality that led to its formation. *Peacebuilding* can quickly become a fetish that replicates exclusionary institutions leading to contradictory outcomes. Being in the buffer zones implies being at the intersection of bordering mechanisms and power dynamics, and utilizing this place to foster peace can only happen via questioning and critical thinking and tapping on tools that bring about alternative affective agency, which we have explored through the performances and ways of working generated by the Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festival.

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EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF RESEARCH, IDENTITY FORMATION AND ARTMAKING IN AN ARTS-BASED RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract

The article presents findings of a collaborative arts-based research project titled "A Journey to Utopia" undertaken by a group of early-career sociologists and artists. By examining qualitative data collected throughout the project, the article aims to illuminate unprecedented outcomes of arts-based research engagement and its impact on emerging artists. The project facilitated professional identity exploration and reflexivity, revealing the intricate and delicate process of becoming an artist. The crucial findings demonstrate the mutually beneficial effects of collaborative arts-based research. The study found that initially none of the research participants self-identified as artists, and it was only through external validation during the project that they subsequently internalised and accepted this label. Artists discovered new approaches to the creative process, lending from researchers the ability to scrutinise every aspect of the issue and engage in perpetual reflexivity. Undertaking arts-based research gave artists the vocabulary to express themselves and the ability to conceive and actualize their ideas in a more grounded manner.

Keywords: *arts-based research, early-career artists, identity formation, reflexivity.*

Introduction

During the period spanning from May to December 2022, a group of seven emerging artists collaborated with five early-career researchers in the sociology of culture, including the authors of this article, to conduct an arts-based research (ABR) project "The Journey to Utopia". The main objective of the project was to study what socially relevant issues have a personal significance to the artists and how the incorporation of the research process can facilitate a more thorough representation of these issues in the artworks. The artists, as a result of a focus group discussion, chose the leading theme "struggle" to depict contemporary social issues, such as social injustice, corruption, and competition, as well as different inner conflicts and insecurities. Lectures and workshops were provided to the artists on the theoretical concepts and various aspects of struggle, encouraging reflexivity that informed their art pieces. The artists produced three environmental installations as a result of the project.

However, this scholarly article provides an in-depth analysis of the unprecedented effects induced by the mentioned ABR project, highlighting unforeseen influences on the artists involved. During the follow-up interviews at the end of the project, the artists unanimously emphasised how reflexive practices and collaboration with sociologists helped them to shape their identity as artists and change their approaches to artmaking. Whilst the project had a different focus, we perceive this as an unforeseen but highly advantageous outcome stemming from it. This can be interpreted as one of the numerous advantages provided by the ABR approach. According to Nancy Gerber et al. [2012] the ABR recognizes that the use of arts is critical in achieving self/other knowledge. Therefore, through workshops, focus group discussions and interviews participants were challenged and encouraged to engage in reflexivity, discovering new ways of knowing and creating new modes of action.

This article provides a theoretical foundation for the process of constructing an artist's identity and delves into the significance of reflexivity in the art-making process. The project's empirical data, presented below, offer valuable insights into how research methods, artist-researcher collaboration, and reflexive practices can enhance and transform the artmaking process, ultimately contributing to the professional identity formation of emerging artists. The authors of this article underscore the ABR project's merits, emphasising its potential to promote knowledge acquisition and facilitate change.

The formation of the artist's identity

This section of the article provides a concise review of previous studies that have investigated the artist's identity and its constituent elements. Through empirical evidence and data, researchers have sought to systematise, conceptualise, and define

the boundaries of the artist's identity, but the interpretations remain multifaceted and fluid. The data represented later in the article contribute to this literature by focusing on emerging artists and illuminating the process of identity formation at the early stages of their careers.

In the scientific literature, researchers point to the presence of myth as of great importance in defining the profession of an artist. As Ryan Daniel [2016: 15] writes "*the concept of the artist in contemporary society is one that, to a significant extent, continues to be underpinned by myth, perception and assumption*". Alison Bain [2005: 29] speaks of a "*myth-taken*" identity constructed through the historical change of Western society and the artist's status and role in it. She explains that the myth of the artist as marginal, alienated and creatively free with the status of an "*outsider*" has remained to this day. Daniel [2016: 15] also adds descriptive terms such as "*bohemian, madness, fringe, alternative, rebellion, genius*" to the list. Other studies use the concept of "*charismatic myth*", stating that it's "*crucial to the perception of the artist as an occupational category*" [Røyseng et al. 2007: 1]. The myth is based on the idea that artists are "*people with extraordinary talents possessing the ability to create unique and sublime works of art*" that are "*carried out in a disinterested manner with a pure aesthetic vision as the only guiding light*" [Røyseng et al. 2007: 1]. Charles R. Simpson in a similar way points out that artists in Western culture are idealised as members of a "*sacred profession*" thus romanticising the creative abilities of artists [Bain 2005: 30]. Sigrid Røyseng and colleagues [2007], while researching the relevance of the charismatic myth as a discourse among young Norwegian artists towards the end of the 1990s, discover that the artists both reject and accept this myth at the same time. Furthermore, artists are encouraged to exaggerate and exploit their individuality, as well as to fit into popular myths to reinforce professional authenticity [Røyseng et al. 2007: 2].

Widely occurring theses in social sciences state that two elements are important in the formation of identity: the individual and the society. The previous paragraph highlights an example that indicates the influence of society in the process of forming an artist's identity through reproducing certain assumptions and myths. But what does the research so far reveal about the artist's self-identity? Adele Flood in her study with ten textile artists observed "*conflict in accepting the reality of the artist title*" [2011: 133]. She explains that adopting this title means to "*accept whatever construct of artist they have created as a representation of self in tandem with, and in comparison to, culturally determined criteria*" and that the title of an artist is an important step in how "*the artistic self can come into being*" [2011: 133]. Flood suggests that the act of self-identification as an artist is a crucial milestone in artistic and personal development, whereas other professions such as lawyers, doctors, and teachers are recognized through the completion of accredited educational programmes and

attainment of degrees [2011: 133]. In contrast, artists must seek a distinct form of public recognition, where "*boundaries can be obscure and judgements of the appointed arbiters of taste can shift and change*" [2011: 133].

In comparison, Jeffri and Greenblatt [1989: 10] suggest there are three ways to define an artist including several categories in each of them: the marketplace definition, the education and affiliation definition, and the self and peer definition. The marketplace definition includes artists who make their living through their art, receive some income as artists or at least intend to make a living by it [Jeffri and Greenblatt 1989: 10]. The education and affiliation definition defines artists who have formal education in "*the fine, creative, performing, or literary arts*" or belong to an artists' union or association [Jeffri and Greenblatt 1989: 10]. However, the self and peer definition includes artists who think of themselves as artists, are recognized by their peers as such, spend "*substantial amount of time*" creating art, and have a talent or inner drive to make art [Jeffri and Greenblatt 1989: 10]. Their research findings reveal that artists reject the marketplace definition and overwhelmingly favour the self and peer definition [Jeffri and Greenblatt 1989: 10]. In more detail, their research reveals that artists consider the amount of time devoted to one's work, peer recognition, and having an inner drive to do the work to be much more important than making an income, professional affiliation, and education [Jeffri and Greenblatt 1989: 10].

This section of the article provides some apt examples of previous studies that have explored the identity of artists and their various components by focusing on emerging artists and their identity formation process in the early stages of their careers. While researchers have tried to define and conceptualise the artist's identity using empirical data, there is still a lot of diversity and fluidity in the interpretations. In defining the artist's identity, researchers have identified the presence of myth as an essential element. Self-identification as an artist is a crucial milestone in artistic and personal development. Finally, research shows that artists favour the self and peer definition, emphasising the importance of time devoted to one's work, peer recognition, and inner drive. Within this context, reflexivity has been described as a valuable tool for developing self-awareness and transforming pre-existing knowledge.

The significance of reflection in the artistic process

The notion that art serves as a reflection of society and culture has been well established, but what about the role of reflection within the artistic process and the formation of artistic thought? Reflexivity has been described in various contexts as a deliberate exploration of experience, a process of learning, self-evaluation, and consideration of feedback from peers, as well as an identification of problems [Olmos-Vega et al. 2023: 242]. Additionally, reflection is recognized as a valuable

tool for developing self-awareness and transforming pre-existing knowledge [Bertling 2019]. In the standard form, reflection is formed through language [Bertling 2019: 30], communicating reflexive thoughts, but over the years, various types of reflexive practices have been created, improved and applied in the research field.

Special attention is paid to the reflection process in the field of art education, stating that "*in the process of creating, artists reflect on their work, consider alternative points of view, try out changes, and begin the cycle of revision again*" [Hoffmann Davis 2005: 11]. Jessica Hoffmann Davis in her study of schools that focus on the arts, observed two core artistic priorities – process (*the doing*) and reflection (*the thinking on the doing*), indicating that redoing (*process informed by reflection*) follows and restarts the aforementioned interactions [Hoffmann Davis 2005]. Explaining in more detail "*reflection is intrinsically tied to process and directly imprinted on our next effort – which in turn will become a new source of reflection and revision*" [Hoffmann Davis 2005: 14]. She also states that "*an obvious and frequently cited goal of reflection on process is assessment, whether of individual or collective performance*" [Hoffmann Davis 2005: 14]. In conclusion, the emphasis on the reflection process in art education highlights the significance of artists reflecting on their work, trying out changes, and beginning the cycle of revision again, with the ultimate goal of assessing individual or collective performance.

Also, in the context of this article, it is important to highlight the work of Sidney Walker. She did a 10-week art education studio methods course where graduate and undergraduate students were introduced to the artmaking process in a highly conscious and reflective manner [Walker 2004: 7]. "*The goal was to understand conceptual approaches to artmaking and comprehend how specific artistic practices enabled conceptualization*" [Walker 2004: 7]. Walker emphasises that "*reflective documentation of the process*" played a big role during the project because "*all of the students had prior experience with artmaking, but it is doubtful that their attention had been so directly engaged with the process itself*" [Walker 2004: 8]. As one of the most surprising results of the project, she pointed out the "*strong sentiments about increased confidence as an artist and decidedly new understandings of the role of meaning-making in artmaking*" [Walker 2004: 8]. Many of the participants in Sidney Walker's project pointed to "*a significant change in understanding about the purposes of artmaking*" [2004: 8]. One participant stated that this course allowed him to gain a vocabulary in which to communicate his ideas to others and allowed him to consciously explore the process of creating his art. Another participant stated that thinking about her idea for a long time created "*a sense of depth in artmaking that cannot be found in projects that are hurried through*". She also stated that the project made it possible to realise that all her previous works were "*skill-based*" and meaning was attached only afterwards. Sidney Walker has also observed this situation among

contemporary artists in her other study, where "*artists begin artworks without clear end-goals and engage cycles of problem reformulation throughout the process*" [2004: 10]. These findings deeply resonate with the statements and feelings of artists participating in the project "The Journey to Utopia", which will be discussed in more detail further. In summary, the significance of reflection in the artistic process has been widely discussed in the aforementioned research. Through reflection, artists can explore their experiences, evaluate their work, and develop self-awareness. Reflexivity can lead to a deeper understanding of the art-making process and a greater sense of confidence and purpose among artists. As such, reflection remains an essential aspect of artistic practice and education.

Methodology

The ABR project "The Journey to Utopia" utilised a variety of methods including two focus-group discussions, five workshops and six semi-structured interviews with participating artists. Project "The Journey to Utopia" which took place in Stāmeriena palace, Latvia, in the summer of 2022 combined the ABR approach and the creation of new art pieces – 7 young and emerging artists in their early twenties created artworks about social issues that are relevant to them and from which they would like to escape.

The ABR approach was integral throughout the project. The project began with a focus group discussion aimed at identifying pertinent social issues for artists, focusing on their concerns, thoughts, and common ground. Topics ranged from social injustice and corruption to cultural heritage and societal competition. After deliberation, the artists settled on "struggle" as their central theme, representing the fight against various societal challenges such as dishonesty, violence, and social injustice. This topic also embodies their ongoing battle for resources, opportunities, acceptance, and success in society.

The project continued with lectures and discussions for the artists provided by professionals to ensure a better and broader understanding of theoretical concepts concerning the "struggle" in society and how an individual responds to situations where one must struggle. At the first creative camp in Stāmeriena palace, artists were introduced to the ABR approach and explored various artistic methods that can be employed in the process of research. Additional lectures covered sociological and psychological aspects of struggle, providing a broader perspective. After the lectures artists engaged in reflective workshops and presented small performances, based on shared experiences regarding various struggles observed in one's life and society. When the first creative camp came to an end artists presented their ideas for art pieces substantiating them with gained insights from lectures and reflective conversations. In the next camp, artists developed their art pieces reflecting contemporary social

issues. During this project artists were introduced to and experienced in practice the ABR approach and the created art pieces leave imprints of reflections of contemporary social problems in art.

The interview data gathered at the final stage of the project, is the primary focus of this article, seeking to uncover the transformative experiences that the artists underwent during the project and explore how their perceptions of being an artist and creating art were altered. A thematic analysis was employed to code and structure the collected data into saturated categories. The study identifies two outcomes that emphasise the significance of collaborative ABR projects. The findings are presented in two sections, which delve into the process of identity construction among emerging artists and highlight the crucial role of reflexivity in the artmaking process.

Formation of a young artist's identity

The participants in this study were in the early stages of their artistic careers, a developmental phase marked by introspection and exploration of one's identity, values, and prospects. The findings of the study indicate that young artists are actively engaged in critical reflection on the construction of their personal and artistic identities within the broader social context. Specifically, the participants expressed concerns about their identity as artists, including questions about their legitimacy and the criteria required for them to be recognized as such. These inquiries were rooted not only in considerations of their artistic practice but also in broader societal expectations and norms.

During the project, young artists' perception of themselves and their identity as "artists" changed. Initially, some did not identify with the term and felt uncomfortable using it. They felt that they had not yet achieved enough or lacked formal qualifications in the arts. They also indicated a discrepancy between their self-perception and the societal expectations of what it means to be an artist: "*Sometimes I want to avoid the connotation that comes along with the word "artist", it seems that it doesn't help to understand who I am and what I want to be*" (*Tanja*). In this case, A. Flood's idea is important that by adopting the title "artist" it means to accept the socially constructed multi-layered meaning of this notion, which, as one of the respondents says, can complicate the process of understanding one's identity. It was also acknowledged by project participants that the label and identity category of "artist" often comes with the perception of greater freedom and societal acceptance of deviation from norms. This empirical observation can be linked to A. Bain's theory about the "*myth-taken*" identity of an artist, confirms that the myth of an artist as a marginal, creatively free "*outsider*" has survived to this day [2005]. It can be implied that young artists at the beginning of the project do not clearly identify

themselves as artists, because there is not yet the inner feeling that something has been done to validate or approve their identity as artists. It can be observed that there is a need for young artists to seek external sources of validation, such as institutional recognition or peer recognition of their work, to bolster their self-perception as an "artist", which can be linked to Jeffri and Greenblatt's theory about education, self and peer definitions of an artist.

Throughout the project, the young artists encountered novel situations that provided validation for their identities as "artists". It is noteworthy, however, that the mere act of participating in the project, as well as the opportunity to be featured in an exhibition open to a wider audience, increased the artists' self-assurance and affirmed their pursuit of art. One artist during the in-depth interview revealed that there was a conversation among artists before the opening of the exhibition about how to sign their artworks – "*do I count as an artist or not yet, at what point should you start calling yourself an artist?*" (*Tanja*). One of the project managers used the word "artists" to describe the participants and one of the artists recalling this situation says – "*I immediately thought: "Oh, so this is the moment?" It [being able to identify oneself as an artist] probably depends on the fact that someone else calls you that. And then you think – "O, I can label myself as an artist!"*" (*Tanja*). The validation from other people can serve as one of the first signals that allows an artist to identify oneself as such. This quote emphasises the power that other people have over an artist's self-perception. When others give a person approval and describe one as an artist, it gives the artist a sense of validation. This is a pure example of Jeffri and Greenblatt's offered peer definition of an artist when artists are recognized by their peers as such.

The fact of participation in the project and a chance to include artworks in an exhibition also helped young artists to identify themselves as such, and generated a sense of pride in creating artworks. One artist revealed that until this project "*I always had the feeling that I'm only acting as an artist, that's a problem. You [researchers] gave us the label that we are artists by giving us (..) a chance to express ourselves*" (*Anne*). Not only verbal validation by others can encourage one to identify as an artist, but also the given opportunities that allow one to introduce artworks to a broader public. Another artist commented: "*I think it is very nice that we participated somewhere, that our name is there, that other people go there and see that (..). I think it is a huge pride that we did something, that it is for a broader public*" (*Marija*). Participation in an art project and exhibiting artworks can serve as objective criteria for identifying oneself as an artist, providing young artists with a sense of pride, confidence, and reassurance in their skills and career aspirations. This project helped young artists overcome fears and gain a sense of identity as artists. External validation and approval of their identity are important for young artists, but objective factors such as participation in an art project and exhibiting artworks are equally significant.

These objective facts reinforce young artists' confidence in their ability to create art and their identity as artists.

From the concept to the artwork

Further in our analysis we want to focus on the creative process and transformative experiences emerging artists emphasised multiple times during thein-depth interviews. As one of the most significant benefits from this project, the attention to the development of a concept of the artwork was indicated. Artists noted that usually they start creating artwork and more or less just go with the flow, letting materials, shapes and textures lead the way to the final work. Most of the time the conceptual idea behind the artwork is more vague and broad, with details being refined and articulated only subsequently: "*We have a habit of creating something just because it looks cool*" (*Marija*). So usually the concept follows the artwork, establishing some sort of structure in the creative chaos. When asked to present their artworks in exhibitions or shows, artists adjust and adapt themes and topics so they would suit the artwork: "*Just a question – does this artwork even make sense? A lot of artists would surely answer that there is no meaning in the piece (..). It's trash, but beautiful trash*" (*Anne*). Another artist also added: "*Because usually you come up with something, don't you? And it just comes out of nowhere, but then you have to explain it, why is your work the way it is? And explaining sometimes is the hardest part because the explanation doesn't come genuinely...*" (*Tanja*).

For us as sociologists, this seemed quite extraordinary, because in research the concept, plan and structure are everything, and one cannot succeed further without them being set clear, especially, at the beginning of a research. At the same time, it is important to stress that this is an approach taken specifically by the artists in their early career, they are still at the very beginning of their academic and artistic education, assuming that with some level of professionalism comes different approaches to artmaking. This allows us to identify the in-depth analysis of the topic and the development of more elaborated concepts at the very beginning of the creative process as one of the main transformations and gains artists experienced during this project.

During the interviews, artists acknowledged comprehensive and thorough study, examination of the topic and self-reflection as an important discovery they are willing to implement in their further creative endeavours. Although, of course, developing a conceptual idea for their creative works wasn't something completely new, artists admitted they were never pushed so hard or encouraged that much to work on it to such a great extent – during a two-day period they had to participate in lectures and workshops to evolve their ideas. This finding directly resonates with Walker's [2004] discovery of the importance of reflection in artmaking.

"I already mentioned that it's an idea generation. It was something new, well, it wasn't new, but I had never imagined that you could think so deeply about what you create. I just somehow learned how to do it. We have, I think, such a characteristic of ours – to create it [an artwork] at the beginning, and then afterwards something will be thought of it. In principle, it is not correct" (*Marija*).

Following the ABR approach, knowledge and insights artists gained from theoretical lectures and workshops accelerated the thought process. They were encouraged to express their opinion on subjects covered by the lecturers and delve into deep one-on-one conversations with each other. They learned to form questions and seek answers to them – an integral part of both research and creative activity.

"I think that it was also great that we had some kind of reflection... Meetings, where we developed the idea... At least for us [artists], when we create ideas, we come up with them, and then that's it. We never really think about them" (*Marija*).

"Before you create something, research that thing more. Because if you research something, it means that you have the opportunity to make the same work deeper, you can weave hidden meanings into it or introduce others to this information. Well, yes. If you learn something new about it, you have a better chance of producing a better-quality work" (*Roberts*).

Inquiring the topic of interest was recognized as a method to create knowledge-based artworks, therefore artists become a medium and their work – not only an emotional self-expression, but also a platform for disseminating socially, culturally and politically important ideas in an invoking way. Most of them claim that they have developed a more inquiring mind and try to put it into developing their creative ideas more deeply and meticulously.

The importance of reflection

As the ABR emphasises the importance not only of social transformation, but of personal one as well, we allocated a substantial amount of time for participants to emotionally and mentally process insights and impressions from lectures and workshops, and create space for reflection and self-reflection. At the same time data generation, creative concept development and self-reflection weren't divided into separate stages, but were constantly intertwined, one element informing the other.

The level of artists' personal transformation turned out to be quite unexpected, but one of the most meaningful outcomes. Reflection was mainly achieved through conversations – both spontaneous and unstructured, and more methodologically planned. Although artists confessed that talking about the "serious stuff" was rather

challenging for them at the beginning and made them step out of their comfort zone, they got used to it eventually. Even more, they learned the importance of a shared experience and openness – either talking about global warming, neoliberalism or personal insecurities, they came to normalise different inner struggles they believed were individual and only theirs.

It might be possible to say that artists learned the skills of sociological imagination [Mills 1959] without knowing it. They became aware of different perspectives and outlooks stepping into others' shoes and, at the same time building an emotional connection. For them studying other people's experiences, beliefs and feelings was seen as a new way of learning. Deep listening as a skill is an integral stage of this learning process, followed by self-reflection – what am I thinking about this? How do I feel about this? Do I have a similar experience? Through learning about others, artists learned about themselves, positioning themselves in a group and creating a sense of belonging. In the context of the creative process, this enabled the artists to develop their artworks in a more conceptually and emotionally grounded manner. As noted by Hoffman Davis, reflection or thinking-of-the-doing inspires the cycle of revision and leads to re-doing of the concept or the artwork [2005]. Conversations, questioning and listening were recognised as strategies artists will incorporate in their future creative endeavours, because of their ability to illuminate different perspectives and aspects of the same problem.

> "*And maybe it's good – to entrust something to such a half-stranger, that maybe it inspires that thought, inspires a work of art. It helped so much. Yes, this is an aspect that I could help with my future artwork. It's just some kind of loud talking to someone. You just hear what you say yourself, your own voice. It seems that if you talk about that thing, then you can understand how far you can go*" (*Vanesa*).

At the same time, artists see it as a personal gain – to assess everything more critically, to question everything and learn to form an opinion, in other words, to develop analytical mind and emotional intelligence.

> "*I think, yes, some of those techniques [will be useful]. Ask yourself many, many questions, try to somehow answer them, somehow solve them, and formulate your thoughts in your works of art. I think that it was all about some kind of learning and growing*" (*Vanesa*).

Aside from emotional growth, the importance of theoretical knowledge and research was also recognised. As the leading theme of the project was "the struggle" and during the first focus-group discussion artists agreed that their interests lay in both – inner and outer, personal and social struggles, theoretical lectures expanded both of these aspects. The lectures allowed to enlighten different layers of issues

that beforehand were perceived more one-dimensionally and narrowly. Above all the importance of reflection and self-reflection can be emphasised again, because to process information and position oneself into the subject, embarking on discussions came to great help.

> *"I think those lectures were a very good idea. Because our vision of something is very limited, it's also cool to hear the stories of more experienced people – so that you open up, and think: "oh, you can think like this too, like this can also be done." Yes, and hear something more than usual. Also that afterwards we had our discussion and we needed to make something out of it, that was cool too" (Aija).*

In the context of this project, reflection and self-reflection were employed as methodological tools to facilitate critical thinking and enhance creativity. However, it is important to note that they served a deeper purpose for the participating artists, as they became a catalyst for both artistic and personal growth. Through engaging in reflective practices, artists were able to refine their approaches to the creative process, as well as develop greater confidence and assertiveness in articulating their views on important issues. This reflective process, therefore, played a crucial role in enabling artists to embrace their identities as artists and create more sophisticated and meaningful artworks. Reflexivity allowed the artists to critically examine and question their own assumptions, biases, and perspectives, thereby leading to greater self-awareness and insight.

Conclusion

According to this project's empirical findings, it can be concluded that an artist's identity can be constructed through validation from others and objective facts such as participation in an art project and exhibiting artworks. Young artists need validation for their identity as artists from other people, institutions, or through their work. This validation serves as the first signal that allows artists to identify themselves as such. Moreover, participation in an art project and exhibiting their work provide young artists with a sense of pride, increased confidence, and reassurance of their skills and capabilities as artists.

In the context of the creative process, reflexivity plays a crucial role in enabling emerging artists to develop their artworks conceptually and emotionally grounded. By reflecting on their personal experiences, values, and beliefs, artists can create works that are not only visually striking but also carry deeper meanings and emotions. This kind of reflection enables artists to gain a better understanding of their artistic practice and the role it plays in their lives. Furthermore, this reflective practice can lead to a greater sense of self-awareness, allowing artists to better articulate their ideas and perspectives both to themselves and others.

The ABR approach was instrumental in facilitating these results, as it provided a safe and supportive environment for emerging artists to explore their creativity and reflect on their experiences. Through the ABR approach artists were able to articulate their thoughts and emotions and explore their creative processes in a structured and supportive setting. As such, the ABR is a valuable tool for facilitating artistic and personal growth among emerging artists. This project provides empirical evidence that the ABR approach can lead to unexpected outcomes and unforeseen benefits for all stakeholders involved. Thus, it is important to recognize the potential value of the ABR and remain open to exploring new paths of investigation, even if they deviate from the initially envisioned trajectory.

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