

**EDN Carte Blanche Artists Exchange  
18-21 August 2022**

**EDN Carte Blanche Artists Exchange Report**

Report written by Stella Mastorsteriou

For four days, 18-21 August 2022, a large number of participants working in and around the field of dance gathered in Bassano del Grappa to experience a rich program of workshops, performances and discussions as part of B.Motion Danza 2022, hosted by CSC (Centro per la Scena Contemporanea). The festival hosted an EDN Carte Blanche Artists Exchange facilitated by **Merel Heering** and **Tyrone Isaac Stuart**, among other working groups Dance Well teachers (led by **Mia Habib** and **Chisato Ohno**), Mini-B.Motion for dancers ages 8-13 (led by **Matteo Marchesi** and **Martina La Ragione**), Empowering Dance - The Soft Skills teaching and learning approach (led by artists **Patricia Carolin Mai**, **Marcela Santander Corvalan**, **Connor Schumacher** and **Elena Sgarbossa**, along with **Monica Gillette** and **Sara Houston** (details below)).

All activities aimed to create an open and safe space where physical practice can be shared and reflected upon, where encounters and exchanges take place, and where self-reflection is possible so that organic connections and insights can emerge. Getting to know the beautiful old town of Bassano through the spaces (indoors and outdoors) where the activities took place, as well as the walks between the venues and the insights into the rich cultural heritage of the city were an added bonus!

**Morning sessions: Empowering Dance – The Soft Skills teaching and learning approach**

Each morning, an impressively large group of about a hundred people gathered at the Palestra Brocchi to take part in morning sessions inspired by research on soft skills conducted as part of the Empowering Dance - The Soft Skills Teaching and Learning Approach (ED2) project, supported by the European Union's Erasmus+ program. The vibrant group consisted of people of different ages and abilities, including artists, professionals, Dance Well teachers and participants, young people from the Mini-B.Motion group and people from the local community.

Project artists Patricia Carolin Mai (K3 – Centre for Choreography, Hamburg), Marcela Santander Corvalan (La Briqueterie CDCN, Val de Marne), Connor Schumacher (Dansateliers, Rotterdam) and Elena Sgarbossa (CSC Centro per la Scena Contemporanea, Bassano del Grappa) guided the group through a series of accessible physical tasks that encouraged us to connect with our bodies and with each other, and to reflect on what soft skills are and how we use them in our practices and everyday lives.



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What skills do we practice when we share a dance experience? As was often mentioned in the sessions, 'What we practice physically becomes our skill mentally', highlighting the embodied nature of soft skills and thus their inherent connection to and relevance to dance. We were introduced to the list of 28 soft skills pinpointed by Empowering Dance research, including empathy, teamwork, active listening, negotiation, patience, perseverance, self-awareness, recognizing strengths, recognizing emotions, managing uncertainty and complexity, and critical thinking. These are skills that we all already possess and practice as human and social beings, but there is great value in trying to recognize and articulate them. In each assignment, we were asked to think about what our soft skills are and how we use them in the activities. As Connor Schumacher said, we "practiced being people" in this room.

The final session of the morning was the presentation of Soft Skills in Dance - A guidebook to enhance your practice, the research product of the Empowering Dance 2 program. After a brief physical warm-up in the Museo Civic garden, the development of the guidebook was presented by Monica Gillette and Prof. Sara Houston, who led, wrote and edited it in collaboration with the artists and partner institutions, many of whom were present at the event and are listed below:

**CSC - Centro per la Scena Contemporanea (Bassano del Grappa, Italy):** Luisella Carnelli,

Roberto Casarotto, Roberto Cinconze, Giovanna Garzotto, Greta Pieropan, Elena Sgarbossa

**Dansateliers (Rotterdam, Netherlands):** Jiaxin Chen, Kristin de Groot, Connor Schumacher

**HIPP – Croatian Institute for Movement and Dance (Zagreb, Croatia):** Valentina Toth, Normela Krešić-Vrkljan, Mirna Zagar

**K3 | Tanzplan Hamburg / Kampnagel (Germany):** Dr. Kerstin Evert, Monica Gillette, Patricia Carolin Mai, Felix Wittek,

**La Briqueterie CDCN (Val-de-Marne, France):** Elisabetta Bisaro, Arina Dolgikh, Marisa Hayes, Marcela Santander Corvalán

**University of Roehampton (London, UK):** Prof. Sara Houston

**University of Zagreb, Academy of Fine Arts (Croatia):** Margareta Belančić, Eugen Bilankov, Associate Prof. Danko Friščić, Bernardica Svagusa, Nikolina Žabčić

In the question and answer session that followed, it became clear how important it is to find the right language to articulate dance as a practice so that we can better advocate for and communicate about it.



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*Carte Blanche Session – photo by Anna Kushnirenko*

**Afternoon sessions: Carte Blanche Artist Exchange on the theme of Seasonality**

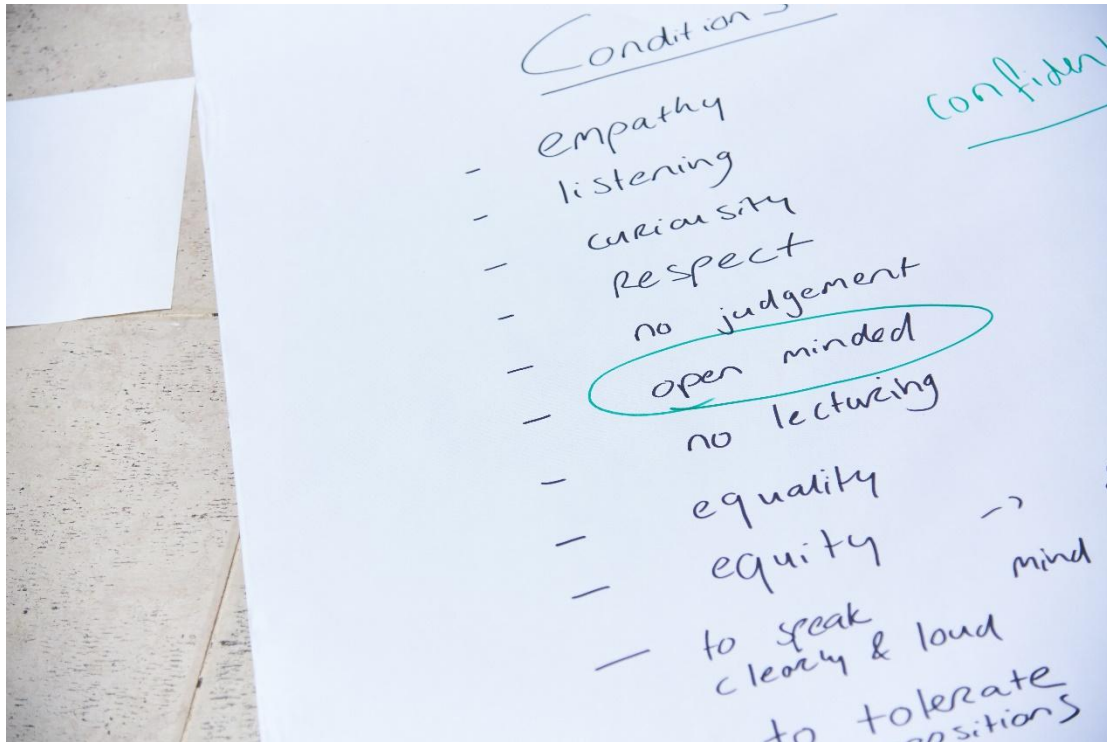
After the lunch break, a smaller group of about 20 artists and professionals gathered in the same room for Carte Blanche sessions led by Merel Heering and Tyrone Isaac Stuart to talk and reflect on the general theme of seasonality. Participants in the group were **Adrian Vega** (Certamen Coreografico), **Alessandra Grieco**, **Anna Kushnirenko**, **Aristide Rontini** (Nexus), **Ashley Ho** (Dansateliers Rotterdam), **Béatrice Horn** (Maison de la Danse, Lyon), **Christoph Bovermann** (EDN - European Dancehouse Network), **Csikós Klára Lujza** (Trafó - House of Contemporary Arts), **Denis Bolborea** (AREAL - Space for Choreographic Development), **Domenik Naue** (Dansateliers), **Emilie Szikora** (Collectif ES), **Eugenia Coscarella** (Lavanderia a Vapore), **Giorgia Lolli** (Residency Exchange Lithuania/Italy), **Guillaume Guilherme** (Tanzhaus Zuerich), **Jean-Baptiste Baele** (CODA festival), **Lina Puodziukaite** (residency exchange Lithuania/Italy), **Lucrezia Ponzano**, **Oleksandra Lytvyn** (DeVIR / CAPa), **Stella Mastorsteriou**, **Yasmin Calvert** (K3 | Tanzplan Hamburg), **Yotam Peled** (Yotam Peled & the Free Radicals).

Each session begins or ends with a light physical task aimed at raising our somatic awareness to support the way we speak and listen to others. However, the focus of the sessions is more on opening discussion, self-reflection, and sharing in small groups or duos. In the first session, we spent some time creating the conditions for a good conversation in the group: Empathy, respect, intimacy and trust, equality and equity, curiosity, intention to get to know the other and stay open, using our senses, giving space, tolerating dissent, setting boundaries and agreeing to disagree were some of the things mentioned. Clearly, many of these points coincided or were related to some of the soft skills mentioned in the morning, creating a connection between the two workshops.



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*EDN Carte Blanche Artist Exchange – photo by Anna Kushnirenko*

Starting with the broader theme of Seasonality, we have tried to define what a season or cycle means to each individual and how it relates to our own artistic practice and work, as well as our personal lives. What kinds of seasons and cycles do we live and work by, how do they support or challenge us in our practice, how can we reimagine the way we want to organize and spend our time and energy? These might be the seasons of nature or the basic rhythms of the earth, the seasons of life, the seasons in artistic work, the seasons or cycles in the body, such as the menstrual cycle or the cycles of breath, or even the cycles of our ever-changing mood. The goal would be to become aware of the rhythms and patterns that shape our lives creating harmony or dysfunction, and to recognize our own actions within them. The second day explored the theme of Seasonality through the concept of positionality, as in beliefs and worldviews and how they affect how we see ourselves and how we spend our time and energy. On the third day, we thought about change and transition: If change is always present and we are in constant flux, how can we make choices that are fruitful for us.

In each session, some questions were proposed to deepen each topic. In small groups, we were asked to reflect and share ourselves and interpret the theme in our own way, depending on where we are, what our interests are, and what we would like to change in our work or personal lives.



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**1<sup>st</sup> session:**

What is a season or a cycle?

What is my practice and what do I want to share about it?

**2<sup>nd</sup> session:**

What moments in the year are precious to you, what moments in the year do you commit to?

What does that tell you about your beliefs?

What within our personal archive impacts our work?

What religions or belief systems do we embody / represent / practice?

**3<sup>rd</sup> session:**

Which aims / dreams / longings are with you now?

What are you striving for?

What does that smell / feel / look like?

What do you want to bring into the world?

What do you stand for?

What are the ideal conditions for change or transition?

What season are you in as an artist?

What do you need to be critical about, in order to make it stronger?

What can you do about it in the long term? What can you do in the next few days?



*Carte Blanche Session - photo by Anna Kushnirenko*



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At our last joint session, everyone was offered the time to complete this process in the way that suited them best. There was space for alone time, for group discussion, and for movement. As throughout the workshop, this was an opportunity to find the space to address our individual needs, but within a supportive group. How can we meet our own needs while being part of a group? How can the group address and support the needs of the individual? As some of the participants mentioned, this is a rare and invaluable opportunity that many of us do not have in our daily work environment. The entire process had the feeling of a safe space for self-reflection, sharing, and outlining possible action steps. Many of the thoughts shared in the group are encouraging mantras for us:

*Take time*

*It doesn't have to come in a straight line*

*You take out of it what you put into it*

*The idea has been approved and is about to happen*

*I am allowed to be happy*

*How to not burn out*

*It is refreshing to spend time with strangers*

*Always trust the group*



*Facilitators Merel Heering & Tyrone Isaac Stuart - photo by Anna Kushnirenko*



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**Thoughts on sustainability and seasonality**

After the workshop ended, presenters Merel Heering and Tyrone Isaac Stuart shared with me some thoughts on how the topic of seasonality touches on aspects of sustainability. Sustainability is a big topic and is intertwined on many levels with the way we live and work. Thinking about seasonality points to a way to look at sustainability from the inside out, from ourselves and the way we relate to others and nature, rather than starting from the big picture.

Both began by saying that the seasonality issue for the workshop arose from the common assumption that "we are not doing well." In the way we live and work, in our relationships with others and with nature, we are not doing well. In Merel's words, *'We can not really distinguish between nature, our environment, and ourselves because we are a part of it.'* This also means that when we develop the ability to be at peace with ourselves, that directly grows and defines our capacity to sit with nature, to listen to it, to be in it, and to understand its needs. To be moved by our environments, to let ourselves to be touched by our surroundings and change our behavior accordingly, this can lead to a different attitude towards nature.

*Climate crisis and nature in general. With seasonality, with practicing responsibility or awareness about how we want to spend our time and energy, it all has to do with fighting against the existing systems and longing for greater well-being.'*

There was also an aspect of professional sustainability and the sustainability of the self, of the artist as a human being, which was addressed by the workshop questions. What are the rhythms, the seasons or the cycles of our working life and to what extent do they serve our well-being? What influence do we ourselves have on them? *'Many people are burned out, many people suffer from major ups and downs, many people struggle with work-life balance. All of these are interrelated. If you are under too much stress, it also becomes more difficult to fully embody the values you want to bring to the world through your art.'* The value of building community, taking time to share, and listening in a supportive group was mentioned several times by participants during the sessions. Merel also underlined its importance: *'When we practice values together, when we practice holding space together, when we take time to listen to each other, then things can really change, if we so choose make it so. The shifting attitudes, the growing awareness, will be reflected in the decision-making of people in leadership positions, in the way people do their work, and so on.'* But as Tyrone points out, to achieve this goal we must move from discussion to practice and be accountable for our actions: *'By doing this in practice, you get tangible feedback that comes from actually trying these things out and learning as you go - there's only so much that talking can do. Talk is the first language, the second language is experience. You have to put experience first and hold yourself and others accountable to improve and thrive.'*



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A counter-argument would be that people have to travel from different countries to meet and exchange ideas, and that travel options are not always environmentally sustainable. However, *'these live encounters are valuable from time to time to create bonds and prepare the ground for further engagement in other ways, for example online.'* Merel mentioned. In addition, many of the participants I spoke with chose long (and more expensive) train journeys over flights - showing that the cultural community is increasingly aware of the issues and welcomes slow travel as a choice and statement.

### **Interwoven thoughts**

The program of the festival consisted of several parts: Practice sessions and discussions between different groups, performances, and a late night dinner at the castle for networking and further discussion. While each part had its own autonomous value, there was also an invisible interconnectedness that was evident in how each part informed the other, creating a unified, rich experience. Here are some examples of this interconnectedness that I experienced:

The diversity of the morning group was wonderfully reflected in the performances of Dance Well. The Lion's Den unlimited by Pocket Art + MMDCDC Agora & Dance Well dancers and Molding Bodies by Ian Ancheta & Dance Well dancers featured diverse groups of dancers collaborating and co-existing on stage in enchanting performances. The first piece in particular also related to the theme of seasonality for me, as it depicted different seasons of life in a unified group. Chiara Frigo's Blackbird managed to engage the people in Piazza Liberta - even out of sheer curiosity - in a big party.

In a Soft Skills task, we were invited to meet someone and, while standing in front of them, take the time to look them in the eye and perceive their face as a landscape. As a clear exercise in empathy and recognizing emotions, we then began to move our faces and change our partner's facial expression and posture. *'Whatever happens to your partner's face and body also happens to you.'* Later, I found myself looking at Daniel Mariblanca's naked body as landscape in his powerful performance 71 Bodies 1 Dance, a call to empathy and allyship.

At the performance Insectum in Bassano I had to laugh when Silvia Gribaudo and Tereza Ondrova satirized the somatic scores of breathing in and out and listening with the whole body: *'Listen to what is here with your ears'*. *'Take your time,'* Gribaudo repeated mockingly. It was a self-referential joke, because we practiced such scores in the morning and afternoon sessions.

The afternoon discussion on beliefs and worldviews related to the banners we carried on the protest walk proposed during Agniete Lisickinaite's "Hand's Up." Each banner carried a





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motto on each side, one directly negating the other - asking how true we remain to our beliefs and values, how we embody, articulate, and stand up for them.

In the morning session, we practiced a collective score as a large group, 'building houses' with our bodies in the vast space. Marcela said that now, when we do not know where our home is, we can think of the houses we built there. In the closing circle of the afternoon session, Alex talked about the sense of home she felt in the group and how she wants to recreate it in the places she goes.

Ultimately, home is in ourselves, in our relationships with others and with the environment in which we live, in the values we embrace. The EDN Carte Blanche exchange generously provided the space and time to reflect, question and reconsider, and possibly plant some seeds for positive change.



*Carte Blanche Sessions' group participants - photo by Anna Kushnirenko*