# EDN Atelier: Mobility of Artists, Mobility of Ideas
## Summary by Carmen Amme

The recent experience of being forced to move from a state of hypermobility to one of lockdown, and of being surrounded by one's immediate sphere, has raised a lot of questions and thoughts about our mobility, as well as more fundamental questions about the dance and performance industry. Held in the frame of the Dancing About festival at HELLERAU organised by TANZPAKT Dresden, the EDN atelier 'Mobility of Artists, Mobility of Ideas' hosted around 25 dance artists, performers, curators, programmers and professionals to discuss questions in various formats. In three smaller focus groups, topics such as mobility between live and digital activity, hypermobility and sustainability, and bodies in digital spaces were all discussed. Open conversations were held in a space in which anyone could share whatever they had on their mind. Later, each breakout group shared their thoughts and summaries with all the participants. The atelier was a special moment that we experienced together, and for many it was their first time travelling and meeting a group in person since the outbreak of the pandemic. Everyone felt a great relief, which contributed to the special atmosphere of the event.

### Moving to the digital space – inclusion or exclusion?

Living and working during a global pandemic forced us to become increasingly dependent on the digital space. Meetings were held online via Zoom, dance houses and theatres were closed, and performances were transferred to the digital sphere to keep global exchange alive. Brazilian dancer and choreographer João Pedro de Paula, who recently moved to Dresden, experienced a flattening of hierarchies during the pandemic. He talked about his experience in Brazil where there is an issue with people not being brave enough to enter 'higher status' spaces. The pandemic and the consequent movement to digital space made it possible to talk much more directly to people who were higher up in the hierarchy, as everyone was in the same position: stuck at home and video calling from their living room. Moving to the digital space has also created new opportunities when organising and holding events. Festivals are no longer bound to a certain format, but can expand in time and form. The digital space will also be an important tool to integrate people from the periphery who were previously excluded. However, the digital space leads to its own problems as it can exclude people – be they artists, professionals or audience members – who simply don't have access to the Internet, technological devices, or the knowledge to use them. Artists must be

supported in building technical skills along with an understanding of how to implement them in their work. That assistance could come from institutions or producers. To improve inclusion among audience members who are less confident technologically, precise and careful instructions on how to enter digital or hybrid events are needed.

## Working locally

The global pandemic forced us to move from a state of hypermobility, zipping anywhere just for a meeting, to lockdown or even quarantine, a situation that continued much longer than any of us could have guessed. Being restricted to one's immediate sphere eventually led to a rediscovery of local environments. Tang Fu Kuen, artistic director of Taipei Arts Festival, was stuck in Singapore, the city he grew up in, for eight months and shared his experience about how he came to discover his immediate environment, a world within a world that he had previously neglected. Going to the periphery of his immediate environment raised questions about how we can interact with people who we are physically very close to but whom we never usually speak to. We define spaces of interaction that we call galleries and theatres, but how else can we bring our work to spaces that we have not yet considered? "In my curatorial work I have to take care of other kinds of audiences that I'm not in touch with in my normal environments. Maybe it's no longer them coming to us and to the theatre, but us going to them," he suggests. This development of what he calls 'affective mobility' might initiate a reorientation of how artists interact with their communities. Mobility will of course increase again, but that should not stop us from going out and looking for more immediate and direct opportunities for contact. The pandemic has taught us that civic producing has become increasingly important. Asking people from the local community what they want to see, as well as using different forms and spaces, might be useful tools to get people from a local neighbourhood into the theatre. Within the dance industry, the focus is strongly on working internationally. But it must be acknowledged and realised that one is both a local and an international artist. The pandemic has forced us to enter a new era, and we cannot deny that.

## Moving to different spaces

"We have to think about our spaces and their accessibility. We have to find the context where theatre and dance can take place now," says Roberto Casarotto, EDN member and programmer at the Centro per la Scena Contemporanea in

Bassano del Grappa, Italy. Having experienced the intense shift towards different forms of performance, many professionals are convinced that the post-pandemic world of theatre and dance performance will be changed in an enduring way. Tang Fu Kuen thinks that the post-Covid trauma is asking us to break the theatre tradition. "The young are asking something from us, we must expand our ideas." We must destroy the idea of the pre-Covid theatre audience and move away from high art towards a different audience. To generate and reach a new audience, we must speak their language. To reach a new target audience, dance and performance should make use of novel technologies that already exist in media, gaming and advertising. "It's a challenge to connect with technology companies for cooperation because theatre is seen as totally analogue by those companies," says André Schallenberg, programme director at HELLERAU – European Centre for the Arts. Universities are usually more open for exchange, as seen in Dresden, where the local Technical University (TU Dresden) asked HELLERAU – European Centre for the Arts if they could work with dancers as movement experts for further developments in robotics.

**Creating a phygital space**

"The movement into the digital space brought a competition with all other digital media that makes it quite difficult," says Berlin-based dance, media art and performance artist Choy Ka Fai, who is originally from Shanghai. André Schallenberg, HELLERAU's programme director for theatre and dance, sees challenges in making digital work accessible to people without leaving them feeling that they could have just gone to the cinema. "We have to somehow find formats to show the effort that goes into it and make the audience realise that digital performance is not a consolation prize, but rather adds something a physical performance doesn't have." Emotions need to be created when watching a screen. If it's possible to feel something watching football, then why not a performance? One example is the work of Choy Ka Fai, who has been working with motion capture techniques and digital spaces since long before the pandemic. For one piece made within the scope of his long-term project *CosmicWanderer*, he placed a dancer in a small 2x2 metre room. Equipped with VR glasses, the audience sees an avatar of the dancer transferred to a virtual environment via motion capture techniques. The audience watches the dancer in real time as they animate an avatar in an artificial environment, accompanied by music recorded in Singapore. When theatres slowly opened back up, this format was further developed to create a 'phygital' space, a space between the physical and the digital. For Choy Ka Fai's project *Postcolonial Spirits*, a work based on

Indonesian shamanic dance rituals, a dancer performs live on stage in Berlin in front of the audience. The movements of a second dancer in Indonesia are then broadcast live to a screen at the back of the stage via motion capture techniques. The audience experiences the live dancer as an avatar, broadcast from Indonesia in real time, creating a phygital space.

## Sustainability: An increasing demand on resources

Choy Ka Fai's *Postcolonial Spirits* stands out as a large-scale phygital project. However, it is not yet sustainable to work in such a way, as roughly twice as many people are needed to realise the show. The amount of people, equipment, energy and funding needed to realise digital or phygital performances is not sustainable. However, digital performance is sustainable when it comes to traveling. Eva Broberg, EDN production manager from Stockholm, Sweden, points out that the goal of EDN is to always hold hybrid events in the future to make it possible for everyone to attend, even those who can't travel. On the same note, she also explains that the more complex organisation of such events needs additional resources in terms of funding, time, people and equipment. The digital projects that were developed during the pandemic are mostly only prototypes; they must be broken down further to a minimum format if they are to be sustainable in the future.

## Chaos and the individual

Amidst the pandemic chaos of lockdowns and perpetual uncertainty, while trying to survive as artists and humans, the question of how the past 20 months have impacted and changed us as artists and as people has been on everyone's mind. As the whole sector shut down and creative minds were forced to stay at home and find new ways to express themselves, many also began to question fundamental structures in the industry. Everyone within the field experienced anxiety and uncertainty as practitioners, but it's not only about how we get through this difficult period. It is also about how things are going to be afterward. To implement the needed changes, Kristyn Fontanella, US-American choreographer and producer based in Ireland, suggests that breaking down hierarchies and conversing with one another, as well as acting to pass knowledge down to the next generation of dancers, are important steps. Having to move into the digital space too quickly has caused a lot of shock, but some good things have also come out of that. We must recognise what's good while keeping in mind the downside. A lot has been said about the stress and trauma

caused by the pandemic, but we should also focus on the post-traumatic growth. We must recognise that everyone is in crisis mode, not only artists. What does that mean to how we identify ourselves? "I am completely exhausted by identity politics, as we have gotten to an extreme point in recent years," says Liz Rosenfeld, US-American performance, film and video artist based in Berlin. How bodies are viewed and positioned within funding and production, as well expectations towards the 'performing body', might shift. Everyone can play their part in destroying the network that we tried to maintain during the pandemic. The time has now come for you to deconstruct and rethink it yourself.

## Mobility of roles

As artists and producers, we identify ourselves with what we do, and there must always be a name or category for that. "We are often misread as having only one role, but we are more than that, we do different things. Everyone in the field does everything a little bit, and we use that knowledge again in other sectors," says Christoph Bovermann, project manager of TANZPAKT Dresden at HELLERAU – European Centre of the Arts in Dresden, Germany. With the current huge lack of producers in Berlin, artists can consider working part-time to produce the work of others. This mobility of roles is desperately needed as we are in a crisis of work and overwork. Even though it is easier and more acceptable nowadays to change roles, we are still narrow-minded in judging other people on the basis of what they do. This doubt is also projected onto the self: Am I still considered a good artist when I also work as a producer, even if that is what I want to do? We have always experienced a mobility of roles as professionals, and it is now time to realise and accept that, in ourselves as well as in others in the industry.

## Recreating labour processes

The pandemic has also called on us to look at our labour processes and at how we can reform organising structures and production itself. Rather than placing that responsibility on those who run venues, we can look at how we communicate with other artists and promote greater transparency. We need to work towards sustainability in mental health. "We also need to create a generosity of collaboration," says Eva Broberg. "Collaboration is always about who has the money. We must start the collaboration in a way that it doesn't always come back to money, but to how we approach each other." A sustainable way to support independent artists is the Swedish organisation Dansalliansen

(https://dansalliansen.se). This state-funded organisation aims to employ dancers and offers workshops and masterclasses for development and cooperation. The dancers carry on with their work as freelance artists, while benefiting from greater social and economic security.

When the pandemic hit, institutions were forced to shut down and artists had no place to continue their work. "For once we were in the same boat with the institutions," says Stéphane Noël, producer and curator from Lausanne, Switzerland. "I was only looking at myself. It took so long for me to realise that the institutions were burning out as well." There is an interdependency between artists and institutions, where the artist is dependent on the institution, but the institution also depends on the artist. No one works in isolation. A perspective shift to acknowledge that fact will open new strategies and opportunities to work in a more horizontal way. We need to find different ways of communicating and collaborating. "There has to be an extension of communication on all sides – politicians, civic communities, artists, producers. Invisible work has to be made visible by communicating precisely and clearly with the other sectors that we are interdependent with," says Elisabeth Nehring, a Berlin-based dance journalist and critic who also moderated the event. There is a great need to raise funding for invisible work. However, that work first needs to be made visible by talking openly about working processes and increasing their transparency. Numbers of emails, phone calls and meetings could be reported and published annually to make such invisible labour processes visible to politicians and funding organisations. The different institutions that we work with all speak a slightly different language, and it is therefore our responsibility to prepare different explanations of our working situation. There is so much productivity and labour on all sides, and it's important to hear that, but it needs an effort and willingness to communicate better. Professionals living and working in Berlin agreed that there are too many artists in the city, as everyone wants to be in the hotspot. Now there is too much competition and not enough audience, and there may be more opportunities and funding in other areas. If the periphery is accessible and attractive for artists, they will be inclined to stay there.

"When the pandemic hit, we expected that everything would change, but it didn't. Now is our chance to change a lot of things as we realise that," concludes Liz Rosenfeld.