



Creative Interference

A Tool in Designing
the Residency Programme Connections

Creative Interference: A Tool in Designing the Residency Programme Connections

by Anne Hübertz Brekne

While one might find ‘artistic stimulus’ to be at the core of any artist-in-residence programme, the purpose, the framework and the ways in which it is offered and used inevitably varies from one residency to another. At Performing Arts Platform in Aarhus, Denmark, we developed and hosted Connections from 2017-2020 - a residency programme for choreographic development and international exchange. The aim of the programme was to connect fellow artists in order to create, share artistic practice and explore the potential for future collaboration and production in Aarhus and Central Denmark Region.

When designing, planning and managing any residency programme, a number of skills and arts management tools come into play; concept development, fundraising and budget management, communication, planning, coordination etc., that shape and define the structure and content of the given programme. In this essay I would like to dwell on a ‘dramaturgical tool’ that we added to the tool box in designing and realising the choreographic residency programme: the concept of creative interference by creating cross-artistic or cross-sectoral connections as a catalyst for artistic development.

Designing the programme

Performing Arts Platform is an organisation for the independent performing arts sector in Aarhus. We are not a production house nor a theatre but a platform that collaborates closely with the whole arts community in Aarhus and beyond – including theatres, production houses, cultural organisations, business organisations, universities, scholars, creative entrepreneurs, independent artists etc. Performing Arts Platform brings people together, ensures and facilitates knowledge, reaches out and provides framework and visibility for the performing arts community in our region.

Connections was a residency programme for choreographic development and international exchange and was created in response to three primary issues within the dance community in Aarhus at the time. One was the fact that professional and aspiring choreographers and dancers tended to move out and settle elsewhere, often in metropolises with stronger or bigger dance communities. There were a handful of professional independent choreographers and dancers working and producing in Aarhus that we were very keen on keeping here, but newcomers were hard to come by.

Another issue was the existing gap between dance as an art form and the surrounding community. We felt a great need to find ways to help demystifying the art form; to better communicate its relevance and to challenge prejudices between the dance community and the surrounding community - both ways, that is. We wanted to contribute to breaking the echo chambers by facilitating inspiring encounters between different sectors, by opening up creative processes and by pursuing potential interfaces between a given project and collaborators or audiences outside the artists’ and our own bubble.

The third issue was the need for artistic research and development without obligations to produce a finished work. Funding opportunities for performing artists and companies are for the

most part geared towards the actual production of a piece, an exhibition or other tangible products. We wanted to provide a platform and a programme for the *initial stages* of a production; artistic research, idea development, tests of new formats or new collaborations etc. which in our opinion is fundamental for nurturing and developing the individual artists' craftsmanship - and for pushing the performing arts field forward.

The key concepts behind the residency programme thus became:

- **Making connections and creating fertile ground for creative interference:** To link dance artists with other professionals within and outside the arts industry for inspiration, exchange, knowledge and expertise – and for possible future collaboration.
- **Focusing on relevance and communication:** To gently force the artists in residence to communicate their ideas and projects at an early stage, to share their findings along the way and to invite people into their work while still in the making. Both for the artists themselves to practice the way they reach out and communicate, and to give potential collaborators, visitors or audiences a peek into their creative process; to provide access points into dance as an art form.
- **Insisting on risk-taking and freedom:** To give dance artists the rare opportunity to focus on research and development by providing the space and the freedom to experiment - and by removing the requirement of a finished, tangible product in the end.

Curating the artists in residence

With the financial support of the Danish Arts Council, Central Denmark Region, The City of Aarhus and Bikubenfondene we embarked on the project. The time frame was three years to be able to address the issues above over time.

The choreographers were selected from an open call for joint proposals between a Denmark based choreographer (main applicant) and a choreographer from abroad (partnering applicant). The two choreographers had the opportunity to bring an additional crew of up to 4 people. Throughout their joint residency they committed to assist, push, inspire and challenge each other artistically – and to engage with the wider community. The residency programme offered studio research time, networking opportunities and access to relevant mentors or sparring partners e.g. within the arts field or within production, creative entrepreneurship, management, the sciences or other interdisciplinary fields.

The duration of each residency was approximately 4 weeks during which the artists could begin a new creative process or develop existing work - and make new connections for the future. The selected choreographers were not expected to produce a finished work, but to give an informal morning briefing at the beginning of their stay, and to conduct a joint public sharing session towards the end; a work demo, an improvisation, a site-specific walk & talk or whatever format suited their purpose best. In addition, we strongly encouraged the artists in residence to open their doors and/or to move outside the studio to interact in other ways; e.g. by making excursions to partners in the region, by inviting other dancers to joint classes, by making a happening or workshop in the public space etc.

Connections was aimed at emerging choreographers with professional credentials in the dance/

art industry. Now, in its broadest sense the term emerging could probably go for every freelance or self-employed choreographer out there, but for the Connections programme we defined it as either:

Artists at the beginning of their professional career, for whom the programme would be a starting point; an opportunity to learn from fellow artists and strengthen local and international connections.

A new dance company or a collaborative in the making, for whom the programme would be an opportunity to try out new constellations.

Choreographers in an artistic transition e.g. an experienced choreographer transitioning to a different genre or format, for whom the programme would be an opportunity to learn new skills, try out new approaches, take risks.

The selection committee the first year consisted of managers of Performing Arts Platform at that time Charlotte Mors and Kasper Egelund, plus project manager Anne Hübertz Brekne. The following years the selection committee consisted of; Charlotte Mors (manager of Performing Arts Platform), Anne Hübertz Brekne (project manager of Connections), Kristoffer L.A. Pedersen (artistic director of Don Gnu) and Marie Brodin (artistic director of Black Box Dance Company). In addition to evaluating the quality of the applications and assessing the potential for meaningful collaborations the committee also had an eye for genre diversity.

Residencies were granted to choreographers who demonstrated a strong motivation for experimenting creatively in close collaboration with his/her partner, and expressed a genuine interest in exploring the possibilities Aarhus and the region had to offer e.g. in terms of network, people, resources or facilities. Performing Arts Platform hosted four rounds of residencies 2017-2020, comprising a total of 10 residency projects and 40 participating artists, in addition to all the collaborators (mentors, co-creators, experts, colleagues, audiences etc.), that took part over the years.

Mapping potential interferers

Each residency programme was designed individually in close collaboration with the selected artists. The process started with a mapping of possible collaborators or 'interferers'.

In physics, constructive interference happens when two or more waves of the same frequency and moving on intersecting or coincident paths superimpose. The result is a wave with much higher *amplitude* than the individual wave. One could say that the overall purpose of connecting artists with other collaborators was exactly this; to reinforce the creative process by adding different contributions and ultimately giving each project a higher amplitude or impact, than it would have had on its own.

The mapping process was a delicate one, requiring a dramaturgical approach in gently posing questions to narrow down, sharpen or open up the artists' project in order to genuinely understand the essence of their research. It also required a certain sensitivity to the 'human factor' when matching the artists in residence with potential interferers. Creative processes thrive on inspiration, respect, trust, energy, chemistry; somewhat intangible factors that are hard to force and should never be imposed from the outside. So the mapping and match-making process had to happen in close dialogue with the artists - and always with their artistic project at the core.

The initial mapping was a brainstorm on potential interferers roughly divided into 4 categories:

1. Possible mentors or sparring partners, usually from within the artistic field (dramaturges, producers, experienced performing artists, visual artists a.o.), who would follow the

project, pose questions, provide artistic input or suggest tasks to help move the project forward.

2. Colleagues and peers from within the performing arts industry to whom we reached out through morning briefings, joint classes, talks, workshops, sharing sessions, picnics, mini residencies or other forms of exchange. Whenever possible we also made sure that there were a few days' overlap between two residencies. A kind of relay in which knowledge, relevant contacts and experiences were passed on from one group of residents to the next. In addition we suggested or facilitated meetings between the artists in residence and relevant venues and cultural institutions for possible future presentation, production or co-production.
3. Relevant organisations and people from *outside* the performing arts fields; anything from astronomers to sound designers, museum curators, historians, business developers, sign language interpreters, scholars, depending on the content of the project at hand.
4. Potentially interested audiences or 'ordinary people' whom we invited to join selected creative processes, e.g. to co-create, to observe or give feedback or to share movement material or personal stories etc.

To some of the artists in residence the most inspiring interference happened with their mentor, to others it was through the connection with other sectors or the exchange with 'the general public' outside the arts.

'It is always inspiring to have a different perspective/opinions and very very useful for periods like this. The dialogue with our mentor helped us to get a better vision of our concept' - Elín Signý Ragnarsdóttir, The Nordic Beasts.

'To be transparent with the process is a way to become relevant, for audience and collaborators - a tool to continuously evaluate the relevance of the work' – Marie Andersson, Augustine Collective

'The more you share the more everything becomes clear for yourself as well' – Iris Boer, aNorange Collective.

A residency of 4 weeks is not very long, so we made an effort to find the right balance between the amount of relevant encounters and time in the studio for processing and actual creation. In other words, it was not the number of connections or creative interferences that mattered – but rather the quality of them.

Staging the encounters

Equally important as the mapping and outreach to potential interferers, was the staging of the encounters. How and where would the different types of encounters take place in order to make them as inspiring and fruitful as possible?

The artists' work with their mentor or closest sparring partners mostly happened in the studio and was always very closely linked to the actual creation process. The meetings with peers, audiences, or people from other sectors on the other hand often called for different approaches and settings in order for artists and collaborators to meet on common ground; a space in which people felt welcome, comfortable, curious, inspired - often with an element of fun or play to set the mind free. It takes a lot of time and resources to plan and carry out these types of events but in our experience it is well worth the while, both in terms of increasing the chance of creative interferences to happen, and in terms of communicating dance as an art form to a wider community. In the following I will bring forward two cases for clarification and inspiration.

Case: *Vintage Dance*

The first example is from the *Vintage Dance* project by and with Sarah Fdili Alaoui (FR/MAR), Annika Kompart (DK/DE) and Aline Sánchez (DK/CU). Their residency was about exploring our *somatic heritage*; the culture and traditions that are stored within our bodies. During their residency they set out to collect and archive dances from different genres, cultures and traditions and to renew and reuse them in new contexts. In addition to being a dancer and choreographer Sarah Fdili Alaoui is also an associate professor at LRI-Université Paris-Sud in Interaction Design and Dance and Technologies. She had recently developed a prototype of an app to archive dances, that the group wanted to test during their residency.

First and foremost, we put the group in contact with two local traditional dance communities; a group of Somali dancers and a group of classical Indian trained dancers, with whom the group had a number of in-depth workshops and exchange sessions. To further expand their outreach and get the opportunity to test the app among non-dancers, we decided to stage an informal and fun encounter with the 'general public'. The idea of collecting and recycling dance resonated well with the ideas behind the waste management site REUSE, which is an innovative space for recycling and upcycling in Aarhus. At REUSE they were planning the official opening of their new location at the South Harbour around the time of the *Vintage Dance* residency. We met several times with the manager who was very open to our suggestions and very keen on hosting the project as part of their official inauguration.

We set up a kind of 'video booth' in an industrial container at REUSE decorated with old furniture, carpets, vintage clothes, retro lamps and music to make the space cosy and welcoming. The idea was to invite people in from the street to donate a dance; it could be any dance or just a favourite move, and visitors could go in on their own or in the company of others. The donation was recorded and archived on the app along with additional information about the dance e.g. the origin of the step, the feeling when dancing it, what kind of music should go with it etc. To truly embrace the idea of recycling, visitors could also walk into the next-door container and grab a dance 'to go'; i.e. learning a short dance from one of the three choreographers or choosing from one of the donated dances on the app.

The event generated a lot of dance donations, talks and exchanges that highly influenced the *Vintage Dance* project and was reused and incorporated in the groups' final sharing session in different ways. On another level the presence at REUSE contributed to the idea of demystifying

dance by providing a safe and fun space for interaction and discussions about the very nature of dance, its origins, heritage and relevance for people today. On an organisational level the collaboration between Performing Arts Platform and REUSE proved very fruitful, and there is a mutual and genuine interest in keeping the door open for future projects.

Case: For Ludwig

The other case that I would like to bring forward is the project *For Ludwig* by choreographers Jernej Bizjak (DK/SI) and Joan van der Mast (NL) along with dramaturge Sara Zivkovic (SI). In short, their residency revolved around composer Ludwig van Beethoven; his work and life and in particular his struggle with increasing deafness. The group's overall aim was to generate material for a performance that can also be experienced by the deaf or hearing impaired. In essence they were looking for as many ways as possible to 'translate' Beethoven's music to other forms of expression. The main one being dance; the others being *labanotation*, sound, visuals and sign language.

To translate Beethoven's music into dance, Jernej Bizjak set himself the task of literally translating (a part of) the Moonlight Sonata into a movement score, by making each note of the music correspond to a particular body part. A very complex choreographic task that makes the body 'play' the music, so to speak.

To translate into *labanotation* we got in contact with German labanotationer Thomas Schallmann. Labanotation was invented in the late 1920's by modern dance pioneer Rudolf Laban as a system for recording and analysing dance and movement. We invited one of the few active labanotationers in Europe to join the group in Aarhus for a few days to notate some of Jernej Bizjaks Moonlight Sonata movements on paper, so that it can be passed on to other dancers.

To translate Beethovens music into sound vibrations that can be felt rather than heard, we put the group in contact with Rasmus B. Lunding who runs the Digital Design Lab at the Department of Digital Design and Information Science at the School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University. The lab supports students in realising projects within areas of tangible and embedded interaction design. Rasmus was a very knowledgeable sparring partner and came up with concrete ideas for making sound tangible, as well as technical solutions to be tested in the studio.

To translate Beethovens music into sign language we got through to sign language interpreter Camilla Røber, who specialises in performance interpretation. In addition to giving valuable input and inside knowledge, she participated in rehearsals – and eventually got so deeply infiltrated in the work that she was incorporated as a performer in the final sharing session.

To experiment with visual translations of Beethovens music the group's mentor, digital media artist Signe Klejs, brought different kinds of video material to try out in the studio. The material that the group ended up using in their final sharing session was to a large extent inspired by an excursion to Delphini-1 at the Department of Physics and Astronomy at Aarhus University. An excursion that I will briefly touch upon here as an example of a fruitful – and rather surprising - encounter.

Delphini-1 is a nanosatellite equipped with a camera and communications gear. It has been in orbit in space since January 2019 and is operated by a team of scientists and students at ground control at AU campus. The group of artists in residence had read about Delphini-1 before arriving in Aarhus and was really keen on visiting. This idea was based more on curiosity and gut-feeling, than on the expectation of a concrete output. There was 'just something' resonating (but not yet articulated) about the whole mission, about the vastness of space and the grandness of Beethoven, and about Beethoven's loss of hearing and the (apparent) lack of sound in space.

We got in touch with scientist and project manager of Delphini-1, Victoria Antoci, who was

fortunately equally curious about the artists' project - and keen on opening the doors to Ground Control. The group went, along with their mentor Signe Klejs, for a guided tour, and what proved to be a very inspiring conversation and exchange about stellar sound – in particular how to transpose stellar pulsations to perceptible frequencies that make them audible to humans. The conversation also revolved around the images that Delphini-1 is transmitting to earth and Victoria Antoci gave the group permission to use these images in the creative process ahead.

Both in terms of visual input and the whole discussion about sound and the need for translating/transposing into a different media in order to hear, the excursion to Delphini-1 proved extremely useful for the group and put their work into a different perspective. The Delphini-1 case again shows the potential of reaching out to people from other industries, and engaging with people who are enthusiastic about their own work, and curious about the work of others.

Reshaping ways of creating, talking, thinking

Over the years we have staged a lot of different encounters; excursions to the Animation Workshop in Viborg, city walks to hidden places in Aarhus, urban dance on rooftops and in Your Rainbow Panorama at ARoS, workshops & studio picnics with Black Box Dance Company in Holstebro, co-creation with Innovation Lab, an interactive installation at DOKK1, sharing session at the Dome of Visions in Aarhus, mini-residencies at Earthwise Residency Center and in Vestjylland – to name a few. All of them with the purpose of reaching out, connecting and creating the basis for creative interferences to happen.

There was one kind of interference, though, that nobody had planned or asked for.

'Because of the Covid-19, we had to reshape our ways of creating, talking, thinking! (...) and I am proud of what we have been able to do. I feel we developed a beautiful collaboration, despite the distance!' – Marilyn Daoust, *What we leave behind*.

Due to the covid-19 pandemic our plans for the residency in 2020 with Canadian dance artist, Marilyn Daoust and Danish dancer/choreographer Anna Stamp Møller had to be postponed and re-designed into a long-distance, partly virtual residency between artists in Montreal and Aarhus. Restrictions in both countries meant keeping network activities at an absolute minimum, and instead directing the focus towards the experimentation with creative processes via an online workspace, and towards the artistic exchange between the artists themselves and the (few) collaborators that we invited into the studio on both sides of the Atlantic.

Insisting on process over product

'There was absolutely no pressure or high expectations from the organisers towards our research which positively influenced both the process and the outcome of the project. As the residency is not product oriented, our creativity increased and stress regarding final showing disappeared.' - Jernej Bizjak, *For Ludwig*.

'The freedom to create meant that we worked more and produced more and did more than we thought we could. We are very pleased with the outcome and excited to take the project further.' - Marie Keiser-Nielsen, *The Farmor Project*.

‘The showing was a great challenge and gift to sum up our research at this stage. It was wonderful to give people an open inside view into our work. It was very fruitful to have those small/informal events to sharpen and define the research and working method!!!’ - Annika Kompart, *Vintage Dance*.

An important feature of the residency programme was to insist on process/creation over production/product. This does not mean that the residing artists did not produce. On the contrary; they produced a lot, but without the *pressure* of doing so. This freedom meant no stress, more creativity, more play, allowing themselves to do things differently, to experiment not only with the material, but with methods, artistic practice, new approaches, new collaborations. The emphasis on process over product was also a way of ensuring an openness and willingness to take risks in inviting people in along the way, without necessarily knowing where these encounters would take them. A risk the artists would have been less willing to take, if they knew they had to deliver a finished product in the end.

Each group finished their residency conducting a public sharing session. Most of these took place in the studio, a few of them were site-specific or took place at other venues. The sharings varied in content and format; some felt like almost finished pieces of work, others were show & tells or rough sketches of choreographic scores, and some engaged directly with audiences.

No matter the content, format or place, the open-ended quality of these sharings also contributed to the overall idea of making dance more accessible. Being invited into a work in progress or a creative process is very different from being invited to witness a finished piece. The cracks, the unpolished material, the imperfections open up and give also the *audience* the freedom to explore and to ask questions that go beyond mere taste. In our experience there tends to be a sense of engagement, respect and co-ownership during these sessions, due to the fact that the guests/audiences’ feedback might have an actual impact on the next steps of the project.

The art of hosting

There are numerous ways of designing and structuring artistic residency programmes, ranging from short-term studio access or virtual residencies to long-term research or production residencies connected to venues, research institutes or companies. Some residencies offer retreat; a safe haven from social obligations, while others thrive on the opposite and ask of visiting artists to commit themselves to an existing community. Each type of residency has its own quality and purpose and thereby of course different end results. Our approach at Performing Arts Platform is in line with our organisation’s overall purpose to stimulate artistic development, to support and build lasting connections between artists, and between the arts and other sectors - and to communicate the relevance of the performing arts to a wider community.

For the artists in residence the individually designed programmes and their focus on creative interference seems to have paid off – both in terms of pushing artistic development and in terms of connecting with our region. A lot of the visiting artists have continued their collaboration and dialogue with local or regional partners, many of them have returned to produce and present their work at venues here. A few of them even moved to Aarhus to establish themselves as artists here.

For Performing Arts Platform the residency programme has also made a lasting impact as we have of course been *creatively interfered with* as well. Our close collaboration with the visiting artists, along with all the people and organisations involved in their residencies, has truly been

an inspiration and has also given *us* the opportunity to connect and engage with people and organisations, to experiment with formats, develop new skills, reach out and communicate in new ways. And last but not least, the programme has provided us with a deep insight into the delicate art of hosting. A way of thinking, being and operating that takes the whole process (plus all the intangible, human factors that I briefly mentioned earlier) into account; from the curation of artists and the match-making with potential interferers, to the staging of encounters and the actual hosting and facilitating, to how the results support the artists' next steps.

The art of hosting and the concept of creative interference as a tool for artistic development is something we as an organisation will keep on exploring and implementing on future projects. We will continue to reach out and make new connections, so that we can work together with artists and partners to support and develop new initiatives that meet current challenges in the field of dance and performing arts.

'The availability of the team and the possibility of sharing and getting feedback from outside all the way through the residency were definitely helpful for the inner motivation. The work that Performing Arts Platform does is of very high level. The respect and help for the artists and the art we do is absolutely stunning. It would be lovely, one day, to bring some (or all) of the projects you hosted together for a sort of big gran finale show, where it would be possible to show bit some pieces of all the new creatures which find their first breath at yours. Would it be just a dream?!' – Emanuele Rosa, *As if, I have missed myself*.

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