

Essay

Both Sides Now

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Report on ambiguity and sustainability in international projects in higher arts education

By Marie Wos and Rasmus Ölme

The first thing that comes to our minds when we hear the term sustainability is global warming. The meteorological condition and its implications for life on earth is alarming. We live in heated times, also metaphorically speaking, as overheated may be a fitting term to describe the polarisation that currently characterises the state of public debate and political division in the West, as well as the increase in stress-related mental health issues. These different phenomena share the tendency towards the extreme, producing burnouts, floods, storms, fires, and extinction that may easily result in feelings of anxiety and hopelessness.

Our aim with this essay is to critically contribute to the conversation about sustainability, by sharing experiences and reflections from ongoing international projects in the context of higher artistic education. We will focus on two projects, which we have been part of developing and implementing: *Nordic Choreographic Platform (NCP)*, funded by Nordplus, and *RELAY*, funded by Erasmus+.

Who are “we”? The “we” that is us throughout this essay refers to three different forms of “we”. The first is the two of us writing. In our respective roles as professor in choreography and former international coordinator at The Danish National School of Performing Arts (DASPA), we approach pedagogic, artistic, and administrative perspectives on sustainability in the projects presented. The second “we” refers to the collaborators and participants in the projects, and the third is a “we” that is open for those of us who see ourselves in the articulations that we present. It is not a universal we, and we are not assuming that every “you” – every reader – want to be part of it.

Sustainability and Context

The past seven years, while being engaged in shaping and implementing internationally oriented programmes, strategies, and projects at DASPA, we have experienced how a previously unquestioned positive narrative about internationalisation in arts and education has come under dispute. The upsides of international exchange, including increased cultural awareness, social engagement and artistic innovation are questioned by students’ hesitancy to take international flights for those purposes. Their primary concern is the climate crisis, but the hesitancy can, albeit more indirectly, also come from difficulties in finding time and energy to engage in international activities while keeping up with the tight everyday schedule of the educational programme. Similar concerns can be seen among staff and management, where curiosity is replaced by stress about the administrative work and the financial strains they might entail, and their scepticism is legitimate and timely. It exposes a pedagogical dilemma. In our experience, international projects keep proving to be significant learning opportunities that provide the students with a context in which they gain agency, and enable them to build paths for artistic and personal expressions as answers to the urgent challenges they find themselves confronted with. In other words, continuing to be an internationally engaged art school seems, at once, as troublesome, and as important as ever.

Facing this dilemma, we have become increasingly aware of the inherent ambivalence in the term *sustainability*. Just like any other term, it is not a universal absolute, and it needs to be

contextualised: Sustainable for whom, in which way, and at what moment? For example, the carbon emissions related to flying is surely a good argument for decreasing cultural exchange. Should art schools then interrupt all international engagements to avoid the carbon footprint they cause? This appears too radical, considering the impact international and cultural exchanges between artists have had in the history of art, as well as in the contemporary infrastructure of artistic production. For freelance artists and collectives working in the fringes of the established cultural institutions, the international field and network is crucial for survival, both economic and artistic. A withdrawal from international engagements all in all appears unsustainable for both the practitioners and the development of the field as such. We will present some examples of experiences where the ambiguous and context sensitive nature of the sustainability has become apparent. We argue that these ambiguities should not be seen as a bug to be fixed, but as a feature to embrace, not just in relation to the term sustainability, but to contemporary life at large.

Cooling Down the Organisation

When sharing the news that one is handing in an application for a European funding body, one is likely to be met with a not-so-encouraging tap on the shoulder from colleagues who once had the same idea but, after encountering the brick wall of bureaucracy and administrative duties from the EU, thought better of it. Indeed, the demands of reporting, communicating, disseminating, and evaluating are hard to fulfil for small or medium sized cultural organisations. Even though DASPA is not a small institution in the Danish cultural field, we have experienced how the administrative duties can end up overshadowing the projects original artistic and educational objectives. A shadow that easily makes one forget the purpose, desire, and enjoyment one felt at the outset. The challenge here is thus one of *sustaining* the initial energy, joy, and artistic point of gravity in the projects. Administrative decision-making and the set-up of the collaborative infrastructure play a crucial role, and they offer important aspects for contextualising sustainability. In the two projects, we worked deliberately on minimising the amount of work that we considered to be outside the core artistic and educational objectives, and to apply a lean attitude towards administrative compliance. As an example, we avoided creating websites or any other public digital platform and have instead used existing platforms as communication resources. This might appear as a minor amendment, but it has shown to be an important way to sustainably balance our resources and focus our energy on the artistic and educational qualities. We have found that it is possible to reach the important goals of openly sharing the acquired knowledge and insights of the projects without over-producing digital content that would risk ending up on what we imagined as an invisible server-cemetery of half-baked, poorly maintained and rarely visited websites from EU funded projects.

Another aspect of the relation between administration and sustainability is the distribution of responsibilities. In both projects, the different partners host meetings, which means that every partner takes a certain ownership of the project. In The Nordic Choreographic Platform, we are developing a model for rotating the role of coordinating institution, to secure a common ownership of the network, making it less dependent on who is employed at an institution at a certain moment and thus more resilient and sustainable.

The question of ownership and engagement is just as relevant regarding the students, who are the core participants in both projects. In a time where student-centred learning and flat institutional structures are celebrated, extensive inclusion of students is imperative. However, considering the heavy work load that students meet in the everyday curriculum, it was important to find a sustainable level of expected participation and engagement from the side of students in various

phases of the projects. We ended up applying a principle of minimalism here as well, not asking students to engage in activities before the events take place. Similarly, we did not create online platforms or Facebook groups for them to stay in contact after, trusting that they would themselves manage and sustain meaningful connections to their international peers on their own terms.

Sustainability as Artistic Material – RELAY

RELAY is a 3-year Erasmus+ Cooperation project that was granted funding in autumn 2021 and started its activities in the spring of 2022 with a digital kick-off in January. The first physical gathering took place in Copenhagen in May, bringing together twenty-five learners for a weeklong workshop at DASPA and Copenhagen Contemporary. The second gathering took place in Bucharest in September. *RELAY* is a collaboration with institutions from Cologne (DE), Bucharest (RO) and Heraklion (GR). All partners are involved in dance and music education, but are diverse in terms of size, organisation, and target groups. The events in the projects primarily have the form of student-driven workshops hosted by the different partners.

The title of the project is inspired by an event during the Olympics in Rio 2016, where the Japanese team unexpectedly won the silver medals in men's 4x100 meter Relay Final. The surprising part was that individually all team members ran slower than their competitors. The secret to their success was instead due to their work with optimising the handovers of the baton from one runner to the next, saving them precious seconds in the tight race. *RELAY* is a project that focuses on developing the artistic and educational fields of choreography, dance, and music and the anecdote from the Olympics serves as an analogy for the project's aim to favour collaboration, the in-betweens and handovers between the collaborating institutions, the programmed events, the students, and artists involved, and the public it gets in touch with.

RELAY is EU funded and quite demanding regarding project management and administration. The minimalist administrative and managerial tactics, described above, to keep focus on the artistic and pedagogical pulse, became very important. Avoiding overproduction also turned into a method to develop the artistic and pedagogical content for the project, and an iterative dialogue between form and content became a concept of sustainability in its own term. Here, attention towards the term "closures" and "cooling down" was used for developing and exploring artistic (im)materials in music and dance. Emphasising the ephemeral characteristics of the two involved art forms, our awareness was less on the actual material applications in artistic production, such as using recycled materials or other efforts to minimise CO²-emission. Instead, we wanted to conceptually explore how to avoid overproduction of (im)materials and of labour, both physical and intellectual (as they perfectly combine in dance and music). When planning the Copenhagen event, we therefore looked at what was already at play, conceptually in *RELAY*, and decided to entitle the event "form is content", implying that the structural and conceptual frameworks at work in the project at large, were already more than enough to serve as content for the week-long workshop. Next to the cultural exchange, the key concept of *RELAY* implies a trust in the idea that the development of knowledge happens through transitions, the handing-over, of artistic (im)materials. We formed a rotating schedule in which the different groups worked in different spaces at different times of the day, trusting that this relaying between groups and places would set off a transient work mode that mimicked *RELAY*'s overall structure and thus connected to the project's seminal idea. For us it was a way not to add more ideas than necessary, and instead find new angles of working with what was already present, making the most of the conceptual and artistic resources already in place.

Another example of how the term sustainability informed the project artistically is the development of a continuous work that runs throughout the entire duration of *RELAY*. It goes under the name *ArtWork* and consist of a processual documentation of the project, inspired by the choreographer Yvonne Rainer and sculpturer Robert Morris and their work with what they called “Continuous Project Altered Daily”. As part of the explorative collaborations between participants, each *RELAY* event will add to the shaping of an installation that transforms continuously throughout the process. At the end of each event the installation will be turned into a *Time Capsule* that will travel to the following event where it will be unpacked, and the transient work can start anew. In addition to the desire of creating the handover and the continuity between the events, there is an aspect related to avoiding over-production here as well, as it creates a procedure of closure. To ensure that we would not keep on opening new avenues, over-producing, and biting off more than we could chew, conceptually speaking, and instead make sure that we finished off what we had already opened. The *Time Capsules* are there to call attention to the closing of the events and to extend our perception to include future times, places, and participants in our experience of the present.

Nordic Choreographic Platform (NCP)

NCP is a collaboration between the MFA programs in choreography at KHIO (Oslo), University of the Arts (Stockholm), Uniarts (Helsinki) and DASPA (Copenhagen). The development of NCP began in 2017 and was initially funded as a project within the Nordic/Baltic network for theatre and performing arts educations, Nortecas, until 2020 when it became an independent network within Nordplus. The collaborative pulse in NCP consists of two annual gatherings for exchange and common studies of the four involved MA programs. In addition, there are possibilities for the students to do individual shorter exchange periods and the institutional collaboration allows for the head of programmes and other staff to dialogue about common challenges and concerns. The desire to create a Nordic network stemmed from an interest in the recent development of dance and choreography in the academic environment in the region. This is closely related to the implementation of third cycle studies (not yet in Denmark), academic artistic research, and the momentum it has given the development of the artform – a development our network wants to foster. This future resilience of the professional field of dance and choreography in the Nordic region is the first notion of sustainability in the project, as it allows the students to form a better understanding of the Nordic dance field and create meaningful long-term connections and collaborations in the region. As we re-think our modes of travelling, it appears more sustainable to build international relations in our proximity. We should mention that about half of the students in the programmes are not from the Nordic countries and that the network is not about safeguarding, nor diversifying, a Nordic identity.

As the network evolved, another notion of sustainability gained traction from an interest in working and collaborating in rural regions of our countries, and in October 2021, we gathered at the Sámi University of Applied sciences (Sámi Allaskuvla) in Kautokeino (Guovdageaidnu). We placed the gathering here to give ourselves a chance to learn about Sámi culture and experience a rural environment, in difference to the capitals where most of our activities take place, and to include a larger cultural context in the N in NCP. We spent a week in Kautokeino meeting local artists, researchers, and professors. There was also time for the students to reflect on and respond to the input, to visit cultural institutions in the local community and spend time in nature.



Photo: Yaniv Cohen

In one lecture, social anthropologist Solveig Joks introduced the Sámi term *meahcci*. In lack of a precise English translation, Joks used Tim Ingold's term *taskscape* (Ingold 1993), as it relates an area to a task. The task can be picking berries for food or birch-bark for craft and the area would then be the one fit for the activity. Joks described how when this tradition of using the land decreased in a particular area, it had a negative effect on that ecology. It thus describes a relationship between humans and nature where human activities are a part of the ecology, and not just an exploitive nuisance to it. Joks also described how *meahcci* often is done alone. As a personal and small-scale relation to the environment that does not exhaust its resources. *Meahcci* is not an innovative concept designed to restore the current climate crisis, but an ancient Sámi practice that suggests, not just a possible balanced zero-sum coexistence between human practices and nature, but even a fruitful one. This contradicted a common narrative among us, the participants, of humans as exploiters in their relations with nature. In reflections at the end of our visit several students emphasised how useful they had found the term, both to think about their own artistic work through the lens of *meahcci/taskscape*, and as a more optimistic way to view possible shared existence between humans and their surrounding environment. For example, one student, who usually follows a vegan diet, made the reflection that in this geographical area, with its sparse vegetation, this diet would be unsustainable. It felt as an important insight and an alternative to the form of guilt-driven paralysis that one might feel, in which every action is potentially harmful to our ecology. Instead, we can imagine human activities that are not detrimental to our shared ecologies, but part of them. Maybe international, educational exchange can be such an activity.



Photo: Yaniv Cohen

The sensitivity towards context is an important take-away for us as projects organisers, as well. While planning the event, we were quite aware of the irony of travelling all the way to Kautokeino in order to think of these things. We did investigate the possibility of travelling on ground to Kautokeino, and some of the students from Stockholm managed to do so by taking the train to the north of Sweden and driving the remaining distance in a rental car. However, for the return, one student ended up driving alone to Sweden on icy roads far from mobile phone network coverage, early in the morning. An event that we, in hindsight, consider to be more unsafe than sustainable. The road to hell may be paved – or iced – with sustainable intentions.

Ambiguity and Ecology

Through the examples above, we have presented how an awareness of sustainability has proven helpful for developing and implementing the projects, in both artistic and administrative terms. The examples also highlight situations and dilemmas that have made us increasingly aware of the complexity and ambiguity of the term. What we considered sustainable in one context appeared unsustainable in another and vice versa. As one of our Romanian colleagues put it: travelling for two days by train to Copenhagen might be a more sustainable way to travel for the environment, but physically unsustainable for the traveller. In our efforts to act responsibly and trying to solve a problem, we end up creating a new one, which reveals a more critical perspective on sustainability. Philosopher Timothy Morton interrogates these concerns and presents an alternative of how to think of the ecological:

You are trying to get the right attitude towards some transcendental principle; in other words, you are operating within the language of good and evil, guilt and redemption. (...) By framing ecological action this way, you have been sucked into a gravity well, and it is not an especially ecological space down there. (Morton 2021, p. 40)

We intuitively assume a relationship between ecological and sustainable, but Morton questions this relationship and notes that when “we talk about sustainability, what we’re talking about mostly is maintaining some kind of human scaled temporality frame” (ibid., p. 64) and “that ecological awareness means thinking and acting ethically and politically on a lot of scales, not just one” (ibid., p. 32-33). In the example above from our Romanian colleague, thinking sustainably in terms of minimising CO²-emission was not thinking ecologically. The mode of ecological thinking that Morton proposes appreciates that the human is just one aspect (and temporality) in the world, while still accepting that our anthropocentric view is all we have. Ecological thinking is not black or white but thinks in the middle. This is quite different from the fact-based discourse around global warming with its temperatures and life expectancies. It is not wrong, but it might not be the right way of thinking to enable us to move forward. Morton says that we need to be able to think in contradictions “Since ecological entities are contradictory (they are made of all kinds of things that aren’t them, they have vague fuzzy boundaries...)” (ibid., p. 76).

As we now find ourselves in the discomfort that the lack of clarity and solid definitions can provoke, let’s bring in sociologist Pascal Gielen (2020, p. 8): “(...) the empirical world is full of static. Reality is always more complex, more paradoxical, and perhaps much ‘dirtier’, but certainly more ambiguous”. Gielen provides arguments for considering the state of ambiguity as a fertile ground for contemporary artistic education and in our case, for the continuation of being internationally engaged as an art school. Inspired by Antonio Gramsci (1992), Gielen defines our present state as an “organic crisis” that is characterised by simultaneous ecological, political, economic, and social unrest. He argues that radical alternatives will not come from the increasingly polarised realm of politics. Instead, he points to an urgency in civil societies and institutions’ collective experimentations with ambiguous practices for developing a sustainable future. In such practices, the trusted compass of conventional distinctions such as left and right, localism and globalism, as well as identities and professions, go haywire. In these liminal zones of ambiguity, Gielen consider artists as particularly well-trained for both creating and handling ambiguity, and thus potentially important actors of change. This is also what Morton aims at when claiming that all art is ecological. Not because art would not make a carbon imprint, but because its ontological realm has the sort of vague and fuzzy boundaries that are significant to ecological entities. It should however be emphasised that although art is a great domain to investigate ambiguities and activate changes, it should not fall upon artists to solve societal problems. But art can contribute by presenting this form of ambiguous and ecological way of thinking and being. In the perspective of the presented projects, we can think of this as a *pedagogics of ambiguity* that fosters sustainable attitudes to living and creating art in a world and time that is full of paradoxes and contradictions but does not exclude the possibility of acting devotedly and living happily. The presented examples of experienced and anticipated learning in the projects could in this sense be understood as experiences of ambiguity, where students’ solidified understandings became fluid and open for other interpretations.

Returning to our initial question whether sustainable internationalisation is a contradiction in terms, Morton and Gielen’s perspectives allow us to flip the argument. Instead of seeing the contradiction as a reason to retreat from our international engagements, we can see it as a reason

to insist on them. We should continue, not despite the doubts and unclarities they provoke, but exactly because of them and because of the ambiguity the work keeps confronting us, and the students, with.

After an international career as dancer **Rasmus Ölme** went into choreography. First through stage productions and eventually in combination with academic artistic research with a PhD from Stockholm University of the Arts. He is currently professor, head of program for the BFA in Dance and Choreography and the MFA in Choreography at the Danish National School of Performing Arts where he also acts as head of research.

Marie Wos is a PhD fellow at the department of Education at Stockholm University. Being part of the research school FinnFram, her project explores identity formation of art students during their transition from education to work. From 2016-2022 she was employed as international coordinator and project manager at DASPA.

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