

keõja Think Tank - Sustainable strategies for the Nordic-Baltic dance field

3rd Meeting (Helsinki, FI)
27–28 September 2013

MEETING REPORT 27-28/09/2013

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1. Introduction

Think tanks are activities where a certain theme or topic is discussed and elaborated by leaders and professionals from different fields and with different viewpoints. Think tanks gather competent and motivated people asking them to analyze different issues within the scope of the overall theme or topic.

Dance Info Finland is organising two Think Tank activities within the keõja 2012-2015 project:

- keõja Think Tank: Sustainable strategies for the Nordic-Baltic dance field
- keõja Think Tank: Touring network for the Nordic-Baltic region

These keõja Think Tanks work towards finding concrete action plans, models, suggestions and recommendations for improved practices in order to develop the infrastructure of the dance field in the Nordic and Baltic countries.

The Sustainability Think Tank will gather several times during 2012-2014. In this timeframe, a group of creative policy makers, leaders, arts professionals and artists will gather to discuss the topic and elaborate it further. The overall aim is to provide concrete suggestions for more sustainable operational strategies for the Nordic and Baltic dance field.

1.1 Previous meetings

The first meeting took place in September 2012 in Tallinn, Estonia. The aim was to discuss and define the topic and set the overall framework. As an outcome, the concept and its meaning within dance was articulated through five principal themes, focusing on the life of productions, communicating value, artistic practices, the funding and support of dance as well as the structures in the dance field. The 2-day kick-off consisted of roundtable sessions followed by a public session, during which the key issues were discussed and the Encounter participants were invited to take part.

The second meeting was organized in April 2013 in Lund, Sweden. One of the aims was to sharpen and further elaborate the key themes that were articulated in Tallinn with consideration for the wider impact of the art form and its reception in relationship to its environments. Particular focus was put

on the questions of sustainable mobility, sustainable funding and sustainable structures in the dance field. Furthermore, the envisioned outcome and concrete results of the Think Tank were looked at more closely. During the meeting it was decided that the Think Tank would work toward a final document that will consist of suggestions, recommendations and guidelines for sustainable strategies and practices. This final document will be aimed at the artist community as well as policy and decision makers on a local and a Nordic-Baltic level. The document will be finalized and disseminated during 2014.

1.2 Third meeting in Helsinki

The third meeting of the keõja Sustainability Think Tank was organized September 27–28, 2013 in Helsinki, Finland. The meeting consisted of working sessions as well as some presentations about ongoing incubator-like projects. Outi Järvinen presented the service manual and the Dance House project in Helsinki, and Torsten Schenlaer presented the research report of the Creative Plot in Lund.

Participants:

Tove Bratten, Norway
Director of Performing Arts Hub Norway

Riitta Heinämaa, Estonia/Finland
Director of the Finnish Institute in Estonia

Audronis Imbrasas, Lithuania
Director of the Lithuanian Dance Information Centre and Arts Printing House

Sari Palmgren, Finland
Freelance choreographer and dancer

Sanna Rekola, Finland
Director of Dance Info Finland

Torsten Schenlaer, Sweden
Head of the Cultural Department of the city of Lund

Ragnar Siil, Estonia
Undersecretary for fine arts at the Estonian Ministry of Culture

Sanna Rekola and **Katarina Lindholm** from Dance Info Finland coordinated the meeting.

2. Outline and agenda

The main agenda for the third meeting in Helsinki was to dig into two core areas of sustainability in the dance field in order to get a significant amount of work done for the envisioned final document. The first day was to be spent focusing on sustainable strategies and suggestions for the dance community and the possible policy recommendations to support them, while the second day was to be devoted to sustainable funding, as it is seen as one of the core issues regarding sustainability in the context of the dance field and therefore requires a great deal of attention.

Friday 27/09

- Introduction and presentations
- Reporting back from discussions with artist communities
- Suggestions and recommendations to the artist community and to policy makers regarding the artist communities

Saturday 28/09

- Funding: Overview of national systems
- Funding systems on a Nordic-Baltic and EU level
- Recommendations to policy makers and next steps

3. Working sessions

The discussions of both days were strongly focusing on the final document and how different matters and issues should be brought up, formulated or dealt with.

3.1 The dance field in a larger context and contemporary society

The two presentations sparked a discussion about the **need of incubators and competence centres** for the dance field and how these should be fitted to their premises, the society. However, it was considered important that such structures do not send the message that the dance field can or should survive without public funding and government support.

To which extent the dance field shares certain issues with other professional art and culture fields came up on several occasions. Dance should define itself as a part of the society and it shares many problems with other sectors. It was concluded that the **dance field could be used as an example of issues that concern a larger field**, because policy makers will not make changes only based on the needs of the dance field. Also, it was pointed out that politicians like guidelines that can be applied to many art forms and sectors. It would thus be beneficial to talk about the dance field as part of a larger context, e.g. not only talk about funding in terms of funding for dance.

The **demands of contemporary society and how they reflect on the operational environment of dance and dance artists** were also discussed. It was suggested that the final document include a short analysis/text on the (historical) romantic view (that still today exists) of the artist and artistic work as well as another short text analysis of contemporary society, how it functions and what it means for the artist. The assumption was that there is a conflict between these two that is worth bringing forth.

In addition, it was stated that the **entertainment business creates confusion about artistry**, how artists are perceived as, and it distorts the image of professional dance art and artists, what the work is like in real life, etc. Touring activities, for example, would counter this by bringing professional dance to places where the only connection with dance is through TV and talent shows.

Also the **current political and economical climate** was discussed. It was felt as important to provide some good answers for demands of economical productivity. It was also stressed that the dance field needs to find **new alliances** in the current political and economical times. It was suggested that the final document say not only what the dance field needs but analyze the difficulties and provide solutions.

3.2 The idea of “the compost”

A recurring topic, which dates back to the second meeting, was the idea of “the compost”. The term is borrowed from ecology and was used by the Think Tank group to mean **an ending point or an exit for ideas, initiatives or institutions that have “grown old”** and for artists to have the possibility **to stop, take a break or rest**, for example in between professional identities, without falling out from the system or the dance field. Composting would also be a natural way of recycling e.g. financial resources, making them available for newcomers.

The idea of the compost was found to be a **natural part of the cycle in the so-called ecosystem of the art field** (coined in the previous meetings). The need of composting is inevitable in order to make room for new ideas, initiatives and artists, as financial resources will not grow (and are, in fact, already insufficient).

It was also pointed out that the cultural scene is stuck in linear growth because it is being measured in figures. This is not sustainable. **Growing is not about adding, but about changing things from within.** A way to do this would for example be to use the same amount of money in a different way.

However, ending up in “the compost” should not be regarded as failure, but as a natural part of any cycle that gives way for new ideas and initiatives. It should be regarded as a possibility for individual artists, companies or organisations to exit the field or their current position or profile in it in a good way.

It was acknowledged that the compost is a **sensitive subject** for both the art field itself and politicians and decision makers, because giving up something is easily seen as failure within the art field or withdrawing funding as something that cannot be done. This is why discussion about it should be raised. Tools and criteria should be invented to support the implementation of the compost.

3.3 Discussions with the artist community

Two workshops for dance artists were held in June and September 2013 and the discussions were reported back to the Think Tank group.

The main issues that came up among the artists were the **need of survival skills** (how to survive in the society as a dance artist, from managing your time and budget to overall employer/employee skills, etc.), the **need of spaces and training opportunities**, the **need of communities, giving productions a longer lifespan, recycling and sharing** resources and knowledge, and, by and large, having **more time and security** to do things well.

3.4. Need of communities

The need of having functioning **communities in the dance field** was a recurring topic and seen as having an important role on a sustainable dance field. Working within a community of some kind, e.g. a co-operative, would help artists in sharing resources and knowledge, offer peer support and create **a stronger entity** with which more things can be done and achieved. Founding or keeping up communities, as well as recycling and sharing different kinds of resources, also doesn't necessarily need funding as such. It was agreed that politicians should be made aware of the beneficial consequences of communities, which are e.g. that they would help artists to be stronger.

Keeping communities up and running, however, requires taking responsibilities and following certain common rules. It was also seen as important not to only create new communities, but to **use and develop existing ones** and, when necessary, change them from within.

3.5 Education and survival skills

Issues related to education were dealt with as well. The need of more skills, the so-called survival skills, that came up in discussions with the artist community were partially seen as **needs for further education**.

As the society changes constantly, also new skills and tools are required on a regular basis. It was suggested that the education system, including dance education, should be **based on real-life demands and adapt to realities**. Overall, it was felt that the dance education system should be optimised to meet the needs of the society and the dance field. It was suggested that dance education should promote **self-managing skills (“survival skills”)**. It was also suggested that the educational system would do more matchmaking between artists and producers, which links to the need of communities.

The question of whether professional dance education educates too many dancers was posed. On the other hand it was pointed out that there needs to be a certain critical mass to arrange dance education in the first place and that the nature of the education process is such that a selection process takes place, since not everyone is cut out for being an artist. Regarding especially vocational dance education, it was pointed out that they are too specific as such and there is too many of them. This becomes a problem when people with a vocational degree want to enter the dance field as artists, without having gotten an artist’s education.

It was concluded that the final document should say something about the amount of artists educated as well as about the content of the education.

3.6 Funding, grants and subsidies

Funding was one of the main focus points of the meeting. The topic was introduced by speaking about the sustainable versus non-sustainable aspects and practices in each Nordic and Baltic funding system as well as in the overall Nordic-Baltic structure and even on a EU level.

Sustainability in different national systems was identified as having **variety in funding**, both in terms of levels (national, regional, municipal), sources (government, organisations) and types (project grants, travel grants, artistic development, etc). Sustainability was also identified as **flexibility**. Additionally, having government support for platforms and organisations that in turn facilitate and support many artists was regarded as a good practice, because it encourages artists to be part of a community [see 3.4 Need of communities].

Non-sustainable models and practices were identified e.g. as **rigidness in re-dividing money**, as inflexible and in some cases **difficult or incompatible schedules** for both applications and expenditure of grant money, as **criteria that excludes new initiatives**, as overly complicated **bureaucracy** and as the **lack of “a compost”** [see 3.2 The idea of the compost].

Furthermore, the **lack of a touring system** was seen as a non-sustainable condition, as having one would increase income opportunities for artists, prolong the life of productions and correct the balance between the independent sector and institutions.

The non-sustainable elements in the Nordic-Baltic funding systems as well as in the EU funding system were also identified and discussed. **Non-sustainable elements on a Nordic-Baltic level** were identified e.g. as **the rule of at least three partners** (whereas two should be enough to qualify) and as **the lack of real long-term funding** (as three years is not very much for building long-lasting structures).

In addition, **the lack of sufficient national co-matching funding** was seen as a major problem for collaboration. In Lithuania, for example, co-matching funding sources is forbidden completely. This was seen as a problem also when it comes to EU funding. Self-financing should be supported in national funding policies because, from the point of view of the governments, it is a way of bringing in more money.

Regarding EU funding, it was acknowledged that small operators have a much more difficult time in getting and managing EU funding than big ones. It was questioned whether the self-financing percentage could be smaller and the final payments be made quicker.

Furthermore, while it was acknowledged that the EU necessarily consists of a heavy bureaucracy (because it deals with such a big scale and on such a high level), and that there are reasons for why it doesn't fund individuals, it was suggested that the **EU funding system could be more accessible** and include at least one strand with less rules and which hands out smaller amounts of money. As with all funding systems, also the EU funding system could be made more sustainable by having various strands for different purposes and therefore making it **more flexible**.

It was suggested that **the national systems should be harmonized** to a certain extent; at least to the extent that finding money to match EU funding would be possible in each national system.

Different ideas regarding harmonizing the systems were thrown out in the open, e.g. making a joint application to the EU for harmonizing the national systems. Even if such an application would probably not go through, it would certainly raise awareness on the issue and point out the problems and difficulties in the current systems.

It was also suggested that there should be either a common pot of money or a strand in each national budget for cooperation between the Nordic-Baltic countries.

The Think Tank discussed funding and the grant system also from an artist's point of view, as it had been an important topic in the discussions held earlier with the artist community. It was agreed that there should also be **funding for other kinds of activities than just performances** on a national level. The current funding structures and criteria do not support enough other kinds of work than creating new productions. In addition, there should on all levels be **funding for things that fall in between categories**, as there should be "**fast money**" with which new initiatives and momentums can be funded before they pass. In other words, **flexible funding** on all levels would be needed.

It was agreed that **recommendations for the funding system and for the artists should meet** and be synchronised with each other, so that the system would enable sustainable practices and working conditions for artists.

Additionally, the expectations of the funding bodies toward the dance field itself were brought up. What do the funding bodies require from the field, in terms of e.g. reporting, in order for the funding system to be more open, less bureaucratic and more flexible? It was agreed that **the reporting process should be developed** as well as it is important in creating mutual trust. It was also suggested that more opportunities to discuss and negotiate before and after funding decisions are made would be needed instead of just applying and reporting on paper.

When speaking of the overall funding strategies and practices, the core change that needs to be done in financial policy-making is to move **from single-project logic to more strategic thinking and long-term development**. New financial models and tools as well as seed money is also needed.

The core message that needs to be sent out to all levels of funding is that **same amounts of money could be used with a different logic**. However, it was acknowledged that any shift in the system would require big legislative and administrative changes that make the practical implementation problematic. The problem with having a system that is built on development and flexibility is that it causes a huge administrative workload. However, if even a part of the system could be more flexible, that would already be an improvement.

3.7 Mapping out similarities and differences

It was suggested that some kind of mapping should be done in order to find out what the Nordic and Baltic countries share in terms of problems, possibilities and practices, and, on the other hand, which are the most problematic differences. This could be done as a survey to the keōja community as well as to politicians and other relevant authorities in order to compare the answers. The survey could ask questions involving grant and subsidy systems, the general position of dance in society or in the art field, touring possibilities and infrastructure for dance. Additionally, the “1000 words” documents that were produced for the very first keōja Encounter in Vilnius in 2008 could be updated.

In general, thinking as a whole Nordic-Baltic region rather than nationally would be beneficial in many ways.

3.8 Style and structure of the final document

The style and structure of the final document was discussed as well. It was agreed that the final document should be **simple and accessible, easy to read and understand**, as well as very **concrete in its suggestions and recommendations**. It was also suggested that the document could include some self-ironic or humoristic ingredients, such as listing some myths or having a page for drawing or colouring something. It was also agreed that the final document should include a summary of some kind. The length of the final document was discussed and it was estimated that already 10 pages excluding attachments could be sufficient.

Also the possibilities for getting feedback for the work-in-process and the final document were discussed. Feedback from politicians would be helpful in order to understand how the final document is perceived as from a policy maker’s perspective, but feedback from all the different target groups would be equally helpful.

4. Outcome

The aim of the third meeting had been to dig into some core areas of sustainability in the dance field in order to work further on the envisioned final document. Sustainable strategies and suggestions for the dance community and recommendations for policy and decision makers that support sustainable practices as well as sustainable funding as a whole were in focus during the two meeting days.

The main points that came out from the discussion dealt with regarding the dance artist and the dance field as a part of a larger context (the art field, the culture field as well as society at large), the

idea of the compost as part of the ecosystem of the dance field and the need of communities and collectiveness.

Funding was dealt with on a national and Nordic-Baltic as well as a EU level. The main improvements would include harmonizing the national systems to an extent where participation in cross-border collaboration within the Nordic-Baltic region is not only possible but also equal and sustainable. In addition, it was agreed that increasing flexibility and variety in funding would be steps in the right direction.

Overall, a significant amount of additions were made to the final document.

5. Follow-up

The fourth keõja Sustainability Think Tank meeting is preliminarily scheduled to February 2014 in Copenhagen, DK.

Before that, the Think Tank members will look for external evaluators, possibly politicians, who could give feedback on the draft.

The draft of the final document will be edited further based on the discussions during the third meeting and shared among the Think Tank members for comments. The draft will then be looked at in detail in the fourth meeting in spring 2014 and finalized during summer and autumn 2014.

Furthermore, the possibilities of making a survey regarding the similarities between the different Nordic and Baltic systems will be looked into and the “1000 words” documents will be updated.

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