



IETM REPORT

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LIVE ARTS IN THE VIRTUALISING WORLD

6 May 2020

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Flanders
State of the Art



Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union

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Live arts in the virtualising world

Today, amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the digital domain has never been more full of cultural and artistic content: virtual tours, exhibitions, audiobooks, concerts, films... The performing arts have also taken part in this digitalisation wave and uploaded dozens of theatre, dance and circus performances online; some have transferred their festivals to the digital world. But let's face it: it is not that obvious for the live arts sector to jump from the real life domain to the Internet. While some creative sectors, which are rather used to produce for the Internet, have immediately augmented their offer online or made it more accessible (if not free of charge), settling in the digital domain hasn't been a five-finger exercise for the live arts community.

In the meantime, digitalisation of culture, including the performing arts, hasn't bypassed the policy discourse. Some of the culture funding structures, in different parts of the world, have put digital / digitised productions at the forefront of their priorities, explaining it by the mere absence of other ways of providing content to audiences. Both within the sector and at the policy level, it is perceived by many as a logical temporary measure. How temporary - no one can say.

A handful of questions have been arising ever since. Should we use this crisis as an opportunity to improve our digital presence? Should we aspire to take any possible step, including making our live performances virtual, in order to keep the link with our audiences alive? Or should we resist this urge to create and present by any means, as we are in the middle of the crisis and should slow down and use the moment for imagining the post-COVID-19 future? Why should we be pushed to rethink the core of our work, while other sectors, which are also unable to continue their normal way of functioning, are getting unconditional support? Going digital

for us: is it about being innovative and creative or about undermining the unique defining value of our sector - its "liviness"? And by the end of the day: what do our audiences want?

In the beginning of April, the European Commission announced its measures taken in the framework of the Creative Europe programme, to support cultural and creative sectors in the face of the pandemic crisis. One of those measures is "Redirecting the work of the support scheme of the cross-border dimension of the performing arts works towards digital culture and virtual mobility". More [here](#).

The digitisation focus is not new in the cultural policy discourse, and today many funding and policy structures see an opportunity to develop it further. While it's unclear how long the restrictions on live gatherings will last, it is certain that after they are lifted, a significant mark will be left on the live art sector - also due to the attempt to virtualise it.

A few weeks ago we decided to get in touch with our members to gain an insight into what they think about this issue.

Our survey was short¹ and ran only for four days, two of which were Saturday and Sunday. We were overwhelmed with members' engagement, however. We received around 60 answers, the overwhelming majority of which had a sceptical reaction to the trend of replacing existing funding for live arts by grants for digital projects, complemented by more or less extensive argumentation. Around six respondents expressed the need for temporary support to digital work, but not at the cost of future subsidies for live performances. Only a couple of respondents were rather positive about a long-term shift towards digitising the performing arts.

This report is based on what we have learned about through that short but effective survey. As we did not hear from all of our members and as the situation changes every day, we do not pretend this is a definite answer to the digitalisation question. Instead, the report attempts to inspire the further debate on the digital presence of the live arts. It also puts forward a few policy messages on how to reconcile live arts and the digital world, amidst the social distancing times, and, of course, beyond.



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¹ There was only one question in the survey: Should funders shift their focus towards digitisation of the performing arts? People were invited to answer the question via email, without a word limit.

The following pages present the 7 key points we formulated based on the survey responses. Each of the points leads us to the same conclusion: if we are to increase digital components within the performing arts, it should be accompanied by a long-term thinking and a careful approach, conceived and implemented by artists themselves.

1. THERE IS SOMETHING IN THE LIVE ARTS THAT DIGITAL PRESENCE CAN NEVER REPLACE

It is crucial to remind that the performing arts sector has been open to the virtual world for many years, embracing it in various forms. Digital elements nourish creativity and foster experimentation, which are at the heart of the performing arts.

But the live component of the performing arts works can never be entirely replaced by their digital version. No comparison is even possible.

What we are experiencing today, *inter alia*, is the lack of interaction between different people, let alone - different parts of society. On a longer term, this can foster intolerance even further and hinder society's ability to carry out structural change. Digital world is powerful in many ways, but it is unable to help people burst out of their bubbles.

The self-isolation times will shine some

light on how far we can virtualise different parts of our life. It will also prove that live interactions are vital, and the performing arts, with their unique power to bring people together, will be as important as ever.

Live arts have a unique power to place us in the 'here and now', where we are exposed to a reality at a given moment, without any intermediary means of communication. Watching / taking part in a performance, together, in the same physical space, has the power to create connections, understanding, and even compassion between different groups that are sometimes hard to bring together.

As one of our members put it, "Liveness of the performing art is its magic, which leaves audiences and artists with a powerful and moving experience of being together, sharing a space, an emotion, a moment".

2. THE REAL LIFE IS DANGEROUS, THE VIRTUAL WORLD IS SAFE - IT IS NOT ENTIRELY TRUE, EVEN AMIDST THE PANDEMIC

Nowadays, no one would dare say it is safe to hold gatherings in a live setting. People across the world are adapting to the social distancing routine and developing a new habit of measuring every action of seeing anyone or doing anything outside their household against the risks it entails. Obviously, in the times of a pandemic, the fewer physical contacts you maintain, the safer you are. For some, this selective approach to meeting people and taking part in real life activities might become a norm in the years to come.

The Internet became even more our public space than it was before. You can't catch the deadly virus surfing through a digital space, it is as simple as that. Our staff meetings, cooking workshops, yoga classes, Friday night drinks, all sorts of cultural activities - all these and much more are happening through digital means.

Whatever you do, there is always a virtual medium in between yourself and whoever is interacting with you; and this medium is usually smooth and invisible enough not to create worries, at first glance.

Live performance is not there to be paused, zoomed in and out, broken, rewatched and rewound. Once it reaches the stage, it is impossible to censor it: at the moment of presenting, there is no intermediary between the performer and the spectator. You can only try to stop a performance physically, but then you are not in control of what message your act will pass to the audience and whether your effort would actually not reinforce the initial idea of the performance itself. This is what makes a live performance unique, especially amidst the ever more digitalising reality we have been living in, already before the pandemic.

Bringing the live performance to the digital domain undermines this uniqueness. Moreover, it involves an intermediary (for instance, a company such as Zoom or YouTube, to name a few) in the intimate relation between the artist and the audience. Some of such intermediaries can decide to erase the content from their platforms. Some others are not entirely clean in regard to privacy and security concerns (read [here](#)). There are platforms, which are more accessible and safer to use in some countries, than in others.

The more of our ordinary life is transferred to the virtual world, the more we feel the digital space is missing direct proximity. This ultimately may undermine one's trust, feeling of freedom, and let alone safety. This concern must not be overlooked today, nor in the future.

3. DIGITALISATION IS NOT AN ENEMY. IT SHOULD BE DONE BY ARTISTS AND FOR ARTISTS

It's hard to disagree, however: digitisation of live arts comes in as a handy and - at times - unique tool for an immediate connection with audiences and creative experimentation amidst the limitation of any other possibilities to create and present - just what we're facing today. In the past few weeks, millions of people have been discovering, from their sofas, all sorts of theatre, dance, circus, opera performances, which they would otherwise hardly attend. Plenty of great art has been enlightening people's tired minds, amidst uncertainty, anxiety and emotional fatigue.

As it has become a trend to say: we should "turn the crisis into an opportunity" and jump from it into a better reality. So, why not seize this opportunity and improve the digital presence of the performing arts - something the sector has never had enough time and resources for?

As this is obviously a very controversial matter, this process must be driven by artists themselves, and not imposed by funding structures. Virtual components should be adopted to fill the gaps artists are experiencing along the creative process and to satisfy their professional needs. For example, the digitalisation might cover new complementary forms of engaging audiences, project management,

marketing, distribution strategies, documentation, archiving, international meetings (to reduce redundant travelling) and more. Here is where many art professionals would like to receive more support. Some, and actually many, would also like to be better equipped to livestream and video-record their work - be it a temporary measure, as many stated, or a complementary tool for the future.

But it is absolutely clear that creation, presentation and circulation of works across borders should remain primarily live, as far as it is possible.

Artists should not be pushed to upload their work online, just to remain useful and tape into the changed discourse of funding bodies, while contributing to the overload of the cultural content online. It is highly unlikely that performing arts will ever be able to compete online with the audio-visual sector, as their main value lies obviously beyond the Internet, and this will prevent performing art-makers from being sufficiently rewarded for their work.

Thus, artists should be granted enough trust to decide how they would like to exploit the digital possibilities, in order to enhance the strength of their work and not downgrade its value.



Screenshot of a digital Sámi Yoik curated by Sámi Lávdí in a video from Jamie Michael Bivard for Dansearena nord and IETM as part of our symbolic [Digital Journey to Tromsø 2020](#), which we held on what would have been the first day of our cancelled Spring Plenary Meeting in Tromsø.

4. LET'S NOT GO TOO FAR BY JUSTIFYING THE COMPLETE DIGITALISATION BY THE ENVIRONMENTAL URGENCY

Looking at the bright side of the current situation, it is not a secret for anyone that the reduced activity all over the world has cleared a vision on how the world can transform to preserve the environment. Organising some parts of our ordinary life in the virtual world, instead of the real life context, has reduced our footprint, all sorts of waste and other impacts on the environment.

Performing art activities, especially when it comes to physical touring, affect the environment greatly. Digitalisation of some of the value chain stages, if not all, might be perceived as an effective solution of reducing the sector's environmental damage. Policy-makers in some parts of the world are increasingly resorting to such argumentation.

It is partly a valid strategy. Digitisation is not necessarily a green solution, however (read [Why your internet habits are not as clean as you think](#)). The footprint of digital activity must be taken into account when fostering digital culture and "virtual mobility". Plus, if we understand sustainability in a holistic way and include the elements of social and cultural sustainability in our strategies, we must find sensible ways of preserving live interactions - which are crucial for social cohesion, shared values and culture, and can never be fully substituted by digital exchanges. However, it is clear, it is a high time to rethink them in a more sustainable way.

The current crisis might be an opportunity for inventing and piloting new models of international artistic exchanges. As an example, touring might be designed in a

more meaningful way, allowing for covering several smaller locations and venues in the same country. This would replace chaotic moving from capital to capital and might be a way of improving the conditions of art workers involved in touring. It could also be a doorway to connecting with new audiences, including those in rural and peripheral areas. This is just one of the tentative examples of how touring can become a more meaningful trajectory - in terms of ecological, social and economic sustainability. We are expecting to map all possible solutions in this direction and build coherent strategies for the international collaboration and working practices in our sector, as part of our ongoing large project - [Rewiring the Network](#): development of a more sustainable future for the performing arts, and the role IETM can take in it.



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5. GOING ONLINE: DIVERSITY OF THE ARTS AT STAKE, AS WELL AS DIVERSITY OF THE AUDIENCES

Digital theatre and virtual reality performance are, of course, not new to this world. There is a growing offer of a vibrant and high quality work in these disciplines across the world.

Some theatres and venues are used to livestream and share video-recordings of their performances; the perspective of being attended online is part of the original conception of some of those works. Some performances are new to the digital domain, but their style and script do not (at least) prevent them from being recorded and watched virtually. The quality of this would depend on the resources and skills at hand.

But let's face it - there are performances that will never appear on the Internet, due to their genre and nature, their way of interacting with audiences, etc. This might, on a longer term, if the policy-makers' focus is shifted towards further

digitalisation of the performing arts, can exclude a vast number of works from being supported. Ultimately, this will undermine the diversity of the artistic offer.

When it comes to audiences, digitisation might, to some extent, be a way to enlarge audiences. At the same time, there is a valid concern that on a long term, substituting live events by digital consumption may also serve as a factor of exclusion. It can divide the public, which is already quite divided in Europe - in terms of generations, economic capacities, and now also - access to the Internet. In any case, there is not enough data available on the digital attendance of performances; audiences' needs and attitude to the issue of digitisation of the performing arts are unexplored. To understand what audiences think and want in this regard, there should be a study ran to investigate the audiences behaviour during and after the pandemic.

6. LIVE ARTS WILL NEVER BE “NATIVE” TO THE DIGITAL WORLD, AND THIS WILL NOT BENEFIT THEIR ECONOMY

Since the beginning of the pandemic, a great number of performing arts companies have started sharing their work, free of charge, out of solidarity with their regular audiences and the rest of the world. Also, as many admitted they did it due to the sharply felt urge to keep going, no matter what, and digital presence appeared as the only option right now.

In the meantime, many funding bodies across the world have also suggested that cultural organisations and institutions share their works online. As many of our members noted responding to the survey, this was accompanied by the (more or less obvious) pressure to make this access free of charge.

At the end of the day, the Internet has received a massive load of digital content of all sorts. This, to some extent, has led to the depreciation of some of the work artists have been producing in the past years. Plus, the policy-makers' requests to turn to digitisation of the arts as a future-oriented strategy have undermined the certainty that there will ever be a restitution of that value. As we stated above, the performing arts were not prepared, neither were they willing to compete for attention with the audio-visual sector, for whom the virtual domain is a usual place to be. And how can such a competition ever happen, when the core value of one of the “competitors” - its liveliness - is not part of the business?

If the digitalisation trend is there to shape the future, beyond the COVID-19, the question of performing artists' remuneration and their socio-economic condition will become even more acute than it was before the pandemic. Moreover, shifting towards the commercially-driven virtual platforms might affect the economic model of the performing arts, which heavily rely on public funding.



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7. WE ARE FACING A CHALLENGE OF BALANCING THE SURVIVAL MODE AND A LONG-TERM THINKING

With all the above said, let's imagine for a moment: and what if this is there for long? Pandemic waves, social distancing, occasional lockdowns... Advocating strongly for the live component of our art form, let's keep in mind that no one can tell us yet when this live element can be fully brought back to reality. These days, we heard, not once, performing arts professionals asking rhetorical questions: will there be any future for our art outside the digital? Will live art simply dissolve if this crisis lasts longer?

The vital challenge of today is to develop a future-oriented, strategic advocacy focus. The goal should be to ensure that urgent measures are taken at different levels to rescue the performing arts. Simultaneously, together with policy-makers, we should shape a better future for the sector, learning from the current context and ensuring that the various solutions discovered due to the crisis (including the increased digital presence) are brought to the future in a balanced and relevant way.

Today, there are three fronts where we need our policy-makers to act. Firstly, they must provide emergency help to people working in our sector, which is one of the hardest hit by the economic consequences of the confinement measures. This support should be given not in return to undertaking new projects, but along the principle of compensating the losses and with a view of ensuring that art professionals continue

having a source of living. Secondly, to maintain the sector's sustainability and viability throughout the undefined period of social distancing, supporting it in creating and presenting their work (when the measures are eased), also live, where possible. This time of "inaction" can be used for research and conceiving new models of working, collaborating, engaging with audiences, touring, etc. Art professionals, normally engaged in busy "survival agendas" (combining several jobs, travelling, undertaking several projects simultaneously), rarely have time and funding for research and strategy-setting. And the third, which is closely linked to the second one - help the sector to emerge from the crisis strong and prepared for the new post-COVID-19 world, (hopefully) driven by the logic of sustainability.

It is, moreover, crucial that policy-makers take a fair and reasonable approach towards compiling those three strands of support. Cultural budgets, which are already extremely limited, should not be thrown into the basket of hardship funds - those money should come from other financial instruments, which should be available for freelance professionals and companies from various sectors hit by the pandemic.

Artists should not be forced to compete with each other for grants and awards for "urgent" digital projects.

And obviously, touring funds and mobility grants, as well as subsidies for the live art projects, should not be cut as if social distance and closed borders are there to stay forever. Instead, there must be a strong vision that the live art sector will be back on stage, and it will need to satisfy a great need of people for inspiring and empowering real-life connections.

Thus, the performing arts community should be given an opportunity for a deep reflection on how to enter the post-COVID-19 future. How can the performing arts sector become more sustainable: spare the environment, embrace fair practices, provide for sustainability of artists careers, instigate more meaningful parkours - both geographically and content-wise, and build stronger ties with local and international audiences? We are not going to be in confinement forever and the borders will reopen one day. Then, these questions will appear to be as acute as ever, when people, thirsty for live encounters, start reconnecting and seeking to enjoy the live arts, locally and beyond geographical borders.

The question of how to bring the digital into this future is just one element of that emerging-from-the-crisis trajectory. And it should be answered carefully, by artists themselves.