

F E E D B A C K

STEAM ROOM for program line Creative Crossroads

(October 2018 - 5th of March 2020)

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Introduction

- This is not a feedback about the micro-dynamics of different personalities and work ethics involved in the realisation of the program line Creative Crossroads. This is rather a choreographic reflection over the dynamics created with the program line Creative Crossroad.
- STEAM ROOM is a non formal group or team of artists that operates in 4 different European localities, having access to 4 different operative systems in the field of freelance artists, (public funds, statuses, dynamics of artistic practices, cultural policies, and so on). We write these words according to our own conditioned working experience.
- We would like to express the feeling of oddness that comes when feedbacking a project before its end. Another concern of ours is how the feedback will be read in these times of economical and wealth/health crisis, when we all experience changes and transformations over the dynamics and values in the field. In order to proceed with the feedback we would need to imagine first that this situation created by the viral pandemia have never occurred and, secondly, that the last two activities planned within the frame of our support, (artistic residencies at STUCK and Work Foundation), are an extra proposal from the project, having a separate feedback. (These two activities will be realised most likely in the post viral period. But this is only a matter of dreaming, without clarity of its meanings and realisations).
- Starting from the first meeting with the program line Creative Crossroads we would love to reflect about its dynamics and its impact over our artistry, artistic practices and artistic possibilities.

Invitation from Brain Store Project for the project line Creative Crossroads

The following are reflections over the matching systems and EU collaborations in the context of Bulgaria when it comes to funding and fundraising for artistic works.

We had the enormous pleasure to be invited by Brain Store Project in the name of Nomad Network to become one of the supported artists, (as a group), in the program line Creative Crossroads, organised by LLB Network.

Already with the invitation from Willy Prager and Iva Sveshtarova it was clear, transparent and very well-articulated the format of the support and also its problematics in the context of Bulgaria. Bulgarian public funds are accessible only if one has organization as legal body, this legal body can only hand over one application per call. So, in this case, if the organization partnered with the program, (Brain Store Project), applies for their own production, they don't have the possibility to apply for the second half of the matching money but rather the artists themselves would need to find a way to come with the matching money so they can access the total amount of the support through Creative Crossroads program.

This is very well-known practice in Balkan region due to our public funds policy and the infrastructure in the field. We do not have production houses, neither producers for running bigger structures that support the field, the artists are the ones creating those infrastructures as well as artistic works.

This situation already creates difference in the possibilities of the invited artists, difference based on diversity of artistic structures in the partnered countries.

Steps towards redefining the relations between artists and cultural workers

On 5th of November 2018, one of us, Aleksandar Georgiev, was present in the meeting that happened in Vienna where all invited artists and partners of the network had space for a short transparent exposure regarding our own work in the field, (some through artistic work others through cultural work). Even though it can be very exhausting and unclear, and most likely a tiring experience, we still consider it very necessary and important. We would like to greet and express Creative Crossroads initiative for making a step towards procedures of transparency in the cultural work and selective processes.

By creating an environment where everyone shares their interests in arts and culture, the artists are not only offering their artistic project but also having the possibility to choose if they want at all their work to be related to specific venues, contexts and people. This format shows clear steps towards exposing, not only artistic, but also cultural work into processes of selection, which is not very common practice in the field when it comes to selection procedures.

We find this as a very crucial and important step towards emancipating the field, without creating an un-necessary dichotomy between the artist/artistic work and the ones responsible for the field structures.

If we don't do so, we will get stuck in the vices circuit of transforming the artist/artistic work into capital, where they would represent the coin in the monetary system ruled by cultural workers, (figures that would use art and artists as products, exchanging them to satisfy the business and to excuse EU money for the successfully realised projects). This produces dynamics where artistic work is conditioned not by environment and context but by someone's personal aesthetics and relations, which becomes very problematic when observed as a public matter.

We would like to point out that we do recognise the step made by the network to prevent such old ways of business in the field, trying formats of transparency in order to start training other alternative economies, (in respect to the values of arts).

However, the specific dynamics proposed by the network could place the artists in a contest position, where culture workers are still playing the role of the dealer. It would be necessary to recheck the framing of the selection procedures so the artists do not end up being the only ones valued and judged in such process, so the pre-set power relations between artists - artworks - cultural workers get configured.

Procedures in communication and planning regarding the realisation of the Creative Crossroads program

One very important fact which we should not neglect is that the program Creative Crossroad is happening for the first time. Regardless of the great communication with the inviting organization, (Brain Store Project), and our "match" partner-organisations in the selective procedures, (NDA Slovenia, STUK and Workshop Foundation), we had difficulty to get clear information of how the program operates. Due to the fact that there were not pre-set procedures for the selective process during 5-6 months, (since the meeting in Vienna until we get clear information for the support system of the "match game"), nobody could point any concreteness regarding the selective process and the outcome, so we could enter in communication for realisation and setting up dates. This process became so slow that our schedules already got full with other works for the first 6 months of Creative Crossroad support, so we needed to move all our activities for the end of Creative Crossroads cycle. That is a year and a half later, which creates difficulties in fundraising, planning and realisation of our project.

Luckily our project is a trilogy which exceeds the timing of the program line Creative Crossroads with year and a half, so we are still in the frames we have primarily set up in relation to the support. Anyhow this created unnecessary confusion for the network. We

depend on public money for the matching, and the public funds in our region act in the very last moment. They all want the realisation of the projects supported to happen until the end of the year (20th December). In our case we will produce one part of the trilogy every year for 3 years in a row. So, we could fit the gap between the expectations of Creative Crossroads and our Public funds for matching and finding more support.

It will be of a great help for the artists if the period between the meeting, (when everyone presents their work), until the clarity of who gets paired with whom is very very short and efficient, so artists would have time to set a plan for their processes and production periods in sync to their situation with the public funds/structures they rely on.

Actual support of Brain Store Project, Nomad Dance Academy Slovenia, STUCK and Workshop Foundation

As inviting organization for the Creative Crossroads, **Brain Store Project** was very practical and had simplified all processes for the realisation of the co-production. They were very efficient, fast, accessible and with huge amount of support and understanding in our processes and artistry. In the periods of uncertainty and unclarity they spend time with us to think together, setting up a stable and secure plan of realisation which left us with feeling of comfort.

The moment they had confirmation for the dates of the annual LLB network meeting, this time happening in Sofia, (beginning of March 2020), they used all their contacts to make possible that our performance **dragON aka PONY**, (first work of our trilogy **dragON**), would be shown in the time the partners were in the city, so they would manage to see it. Brain Store Project has shown great support in thinking how to fill up the holes created from the friction between European and Bulgarian local funding and bureaucratic structures.

As hosts **NDA Slovenia** were extremely efficient, before, during and after the residency.

Before the residency started, they came with amazing proposals of expanding the financial and facility-based possibilities for the residency period, and not only they provide us with letters of invitation but also they prepared some of the applications together with us and some of them they did by themselves in order to create much better conditions than it was primarily stated. The outcome of it, overreached its initial proposal which automatically placed them in the TOP TWO residency proposals in the context of LLB partners, (budget wise, speaking in numbers and conditions).

During our residency, NDA Slovenia organised our participation on ŽIVA festival where we presented our work **dragON aka PONY** in front of wider audience. This was a great possibility for us to get feedback and meet with audiences from the wider context in Ljubljana. Also, they expanded the proposal for the residency to one month and plus organised our participation in other festivals with other works of ours in the same period. This was more than just a residency support for our artistic work.

NDA Slovenia has been following our work since we ended the residency. Still curious, still generous, still interested, they show impeccable work ethics, building trust and friendship within a professional context.

- Related to possible futures -

[STUK and Workshop Foundation are the two other residencies that would need to happen in future. For now, STUK was in very good communication with us and we had planned the residency for April 2020. But due to the situation with the virus, we are trying to shift it for some time in the period of September 2020 – March 2021. As of Workshop Foundation we are planning the residency for the coming July, (hoping it will get realised). They also have very efficient way of working, and they are super sensitive and friendly to different issues such as single motherhood, difficult economic situation due to virus, expansion of the residency time, support letters for our fundraising and so on. They already offered their help in relation to all this issues in extremely generous ways].

It would be great to open up space for thinking about support structures which will expand their project-based goals. To escape the pattern of satisfying the goals by correctly excusing the budget for some artistic activity, and so to think on possibilities for those support structures to include procedures such as:

1. To become friendly for single parents when it comes to artistic residencies and budget structures for it, so there is no need for self-exclusion from the side of the artists because of financial and facility based impossibility.
2. To have flexibility of when the money can be transferred and to be efficient with it, because not all artists can afford to have the money after the residency.
3. To have live or online meetings between the artists and the organisations that supports them with residency or any artistic activity, so they can look for possibilities to expand the budget for the artistic activities: to stay sensitive to the different

structures that the artists are using, because they are in the position of handlers in this situation, between the public structures and the proposals coming from this project line Creative Crossroads. Some artists are using more grey approaches for managing budgets and fundraising. Some are coming from structures with so called “bright future” and does not need to even bother for such topics, because someone else does it for them or have long term structural funds for artists. In that sense, it would be of a great help to have proposed virtual meetings which must be taken from the very beginning so that they could create better conditions and manage to inform each-other more of the work and the possibilities for its better support. This was our experience so far with the activities we already have realised with NOMAD Slovenia and Brain Store Project, and it did prove very successful outcome.

Presentation of our work in front of LLB network and the presence of the network in Balkan region

We cannot escape the fact that there is an “iron curtain” between the Balkan region and the rest of the Europe, (speaking about our field), economically, bureaucratically, artistically, culturally and exchange-wise. This dogma it is a reality we experience strongly and it can be factually proven if such accurate researches would be activated in the field. These dynamics are created because of many reasons and choreographed by the complexity of the European body, but they are danced by all of us, especially cultural workers and artists in the context of European networks.

We would like to take the chance to dig into this topic since at the moment this feedback is possibly our only access to communicate with an European network in the field.

Speaking from the position of recent history, (before the virus break), we witness how European networks and cultural workers visit festivals and premieres in order to include works in their festivals, venues and support programs. Those dynamics are mostly happening in the western countries.

Generally, we haven't witnessed in the Balkan region any regular presence or any practice of a network or cultural workers having regularity and support by stating presence. Neither we have noticed interest to follow the artistic scene and taking active stand in observing and feedbacking artistic works of the region or stating their artistic work as public matter. What we do witness is, first, a big force of support of such practice towards artists operating in western European countries, and second, the huge effort of the Balkan region to reach these conditions so to be part of bigger structures without a matching response.

Still, Balkan countries are very present in European applications. Why this presence when there is not actual recognition and support? Is it because including Balkan countries, (defined as states with lower development in the cultural sector), brings better points for European applications? Why there is not support? Is it due to a polite disrespect in artistic-politics-economic values cause the region is not reaching specific artistic-politic-economic standard?

This logic contradicts the practice of networking as such, as a procedure for strengthening and emancipating the field.

For us it became very eminent the importance of the presence of LLB network in our general rehearsal, the 3rd of March 2020 in Sofia, a day before our premiere. It was the first time to experience having professionals, representatives of international network with curators, artistic directors, programmers, etc, as an audience for our work; and we noticed that the presence of the network, together with the power that holds, matters a lot in terms of active communication, affirmation, visibility and exchange. This is how we would like to work.

We want to encourage LLB network to include festivals, premieres, programs, teachings, etc, in the Balkan region as places for visiting and taking active stand in feedbacking and approaching the field with physical presence, (as practiced in western Europe). We need you to actively involve the Balkan region in your daily basis practice as a network. It is not needed from only one side of the table, it is needed for everyone, systematically and ethically.

The importance of programs such as Creative Crossroads in Balkan context

The program line Creative Crossroads has a huge impact in the Balkan region and it is of a great importance. Firstly, because in the Balkan region, artists, artistic practices and artistic procedures are not recognised by the state. Some Balkan countries have an existing legal status for artists, a fictional one, specifically Bulgaria is even lacking that one. This means that there is not any link and communication on legal bases with the public funds regarding necessities and emancipation of the field, not even the capacity of it.

In Bulgaria we operate with only project based principles: call for production is out in March/April, results are in June, the project must be realised until the end of the year, repeat cycle. And in terms of public events: throughout the second half of the year we all fight for the ONE public venue we all have, and the first half of the year we focus on

selling one-self outside of the country, mostly focusing on places where there is long term supportive structures for artists and programs. (One could say that these circumstances are generally same in the rest of Europe, but if we look closer, the conditions we have here are not even comprable with how western Europe functions).

So, long term supports, through which one could plan, and not imagine, a future, are very much a dream-come-true for this region.

In our case, Creative Crossroads 2-year support brought us the stability, comfort and access to long term planning, (mentally and bureaucratically), and also new work possibilities. The success of our applications for other projects drastically changed: funding bodies/venues/residencies started to consider us as valuable artists to support/invite from the moment we had clear confirmation for having multiple supports in the next two years.

We would like to stress the power LLB network holds and its real potential to change the field micro-dynamics of the partnered countries. We believe it is necessary that the network takes an active stand in the procedures of the “iron curtain” dismantlement, re-understanding the concept of locality and its politics by building stable support and sustainability through active presence, communication, feedback and exchange.

Thanks, keep on and see you soon,

STEAM ROOM