BUILDING AN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY OF IRISH DANCERS IN THE TIMES OF DETACHMENT

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Abstract

This paper is focusing on the ways of building (and breaking) the community around Irish dance. Today being a dance style practiced worldwide, it creates opportunity for international communication of its practitioners through competitions and shared workshops.

The first part of the paper is centered around a case study of dance group called "*Festival Irish dance Russia*". The Festival style of Irish dance has originated from Northern Ireland and priorly has been practiced exclusively there. The years of pandemic have transformed the habitual ways of passing on the knowledge and connecting with the community. By adapting to new realia, Festival has transformed into a more accessible artform to the dancers worldwide, simultaneously reshaping the community of dance practitioners.

The second part is examining the dynamics in the community after the beginning of Ukrainian war and the effects that it had on identity, sense of belonging, and life of this social group. Dance itself being far down on the list of priorities in these devastating times keeps playing an important part as a social connecting glue for the community, giving a chance for establishing connections and broadening the worldview of the practitioners through international communication.

Keywords: *Detachment, Irish dance, building community, multiple identities.*

CULTURE
CROSSROADS

"*How can I dance if people are dying.*"
[Google survey conducted after the Russian invasion in Ukraine, summer 2022].

In these dark times all the 'extracurricular activities' (dance also being such) seem to have become a luxurious excessiveness. Though these activities themselves seem pointless, the remailing social connections and the power of communities that are centered around these activities prove to stay ever so relevant. The artistic practices also have the power of shaping identities simultaneously "*negotiating internal strivings and external prescriptions and of channeling frustration and rebellion*" [Crispin 2009: 25]. Unfortunately, the troubled times have given a chance to put this theoretical statement to the test. As one dancer indicated in the survey that this research is based on, "*on the one hand, I feel wrong when we dance, chat, laugh, i. e. rejoice. But on the other hand, this is a way to stream the emotional discord into creativity – it's a type of psychotherapy*" [Google survey 2022]. The years of pandemic and war are showing different social dynamics in relation to physical and emotional detachment, which this research is focusing on.

Detachment
The key concept chosen for this study is **detachment**. In Yarrow's summary on the conceptualization of this term we see three types of detachment: (1) of the researcher from the studied phenomenon; (2) detachment in Latour's concept of dichotomies; (3) detachment which marks the borderline between tradition and modernity [Yarrow et al. 2015]. However, he points out that the "association between modernity and detachment became a trope ripe for continual reinvention and re-elaboration" [Yarrow et al. 2015: 11]. So, my aim would be exactly to shift the focus and to add to the listed above: (4) psychological and emotional **detachment from the group/state** that the person used to identify themself with; (5) **physical detachment** in the years of COVID-19 created by the social distancing regulations. So, the presented research is focusing only on the last two types.

It must be noted separately that the researcher herself is a part of the studied field, so it would be impossible to step out fully from it and explore the detachment of the first type. The strategy in this research is to give the other dance practitioners a voice, trying to stay aware of own identity and position in the field. Referring to the vivid image of the **self** in the field: it is similar to looking into the pool of water and trying to see not only the reflection on the surface, but also the underwater world [Stoeltje et al. 1999].

Research questions

Since the main concept taken for consideration is **detachment**, the research questions are connected to the two sides of this notion: it's (unexpectedly) fruitful vs destructive effect for the community of dancers. This paper is focusing on a case study of a community of Russian dancers who dance Irish dance and, in particular, on a "Festival Irish Dance" school, which is specialized on the Northern style of Irish dance. The research questions that will be posed are:

- what insights might the mentioned above concept of detachment contribute to the analysis of the dynamics within a studied community;
- what are the new means of transmitting creative ideas, uniting the practitioners, connecting to the audience, building, and breaking an international community in the times of detachment;
- with a sub-question: how are the multiple identities forged in this process.

This research was started in the autumn of 2021 and at first was targeting only the years of pandemic, however it expanded after the beginning of the war.

Research methods

The author is also a dance instructor and a head of the dance school "Festival Irish Dance, Russia", who has also been a part of the Irish dance community for the last 19 years. Constant presence 'in the field' and being included in the dancing life allowed to have participant observations and conduct informal interviews with dancers, dance judges, musicians, dance teachers. Consequently, one of the research methods for study was **autoethnography**. This study is an attempt to approach the field kinesthetically, not to be a *disembodied researcher* [Barbour 2011]. I feel that the dance field, being physical in its essence, leaves the researcher no option but to let the body live through a certain experience. Following Barbour's theoretical framework, the 'knowing' should not be seen as purely 'reasoning', it has also the aspect of embodying [Barbour 2017]. The lived experience has a unique voice and gives a new perspective to the researcher, since it incorporates a "*person's biological (somatic), intellectual, emotional, bodily, artistic and spiritual experience, within their cultural and geographical location*" [Barbour 2017: 220]. Since this experience is linked to 'cultural and geographical location' (looking into dancers of Russian origin get involved in Irish dance) this research needs a wider lens to catch the bigger picture.

For this reason, I conducted one online anonymous **survey** and used one online **questionnaire** among Irish dancers who are originally from Russia, organized in a shape of Google forms. The questionnaire was a targeted one, sent directly to the dancers of the online class of Festival Irish dance, without other sampling. These

dancers share roughly the same experience of doing Irish dance online, however the personal narratives, and connections to the world of dance vary.[1]

The survey on the contrary was open to all Russian dancers who dance Irish dance and who are willing to participate in it. General sample method was implemented: a link was shared through social media (VK social network site) allowing any interested Irish dancer/teacher to fill it out. The forwarding and reposting of the survey facilitated the spreading of it. In the end, it collected 116 replies. The survey was quite representative, as it geographically covered dancers from Moscow (majority) to Vladivostok in the most eastern point, Murmansk in the most northern point, Kaliningrad in the most western point, and Sevastopol in the most southern. The majority of respondents were women (the absolute majority of practitioners of Irish dance in Russia are female). They have dance experience from 1 year to 27 years and are members of either of the two international Irish dancing official organizations (CLRG or W.I.D.A.).[2] The respondents also expressed different political views in the open-end questions.[3]

Even though the surveys were anonymous, I realize that the potential drawback for this method could have been the fear of speaking openly in the online space about any topics even remotely connected to war. According to the statistic of OVD-info since 1 January to 14 December 2022 there had been 21,000 arrests and at least 370 criminal cases for anti-war statements. Following the new military time rhetoric, the category of "fakes" had been introduced (that is the information that investigators and courts consider deliberately false and that is being spread by any means) connected to the "special military operation", as it is called by the officials.[4] These factors might make the respondents extremely alert. Nevertheless, the dance community is usually

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[1] The questionnaire was anonymous, all respondents were female, with the dance experience from 7 to 15 years, three out of 8 living abroad permanently. Some example questions are: "Irish dance for me is... (finish the phrase), "The online classes for me are...", "I started doing these classes because...").

[2] CLRG – An Coimisiún Le Rincí Gaelacha (The Irish Dancing Commission) – the oldest official organization that regulates the dancing life in all its aspects. WIDA – World Irish Dance Association – an organization mainly targeting the dancers from Mainland Europe.

[3] Examples of the questions: "Are you in touch with the dancers from other countries?", "Has the war affected your dancing life?", "For me, the wider international dance community is...", "The social aspect of dance is... for me."

[4] Among the most significant sentences that were based on the online activities were: 8 years and 6 months of colony for a stream on the crimes of Russian army in Bucha; 6 years imprisonment for a post about the destroyed drama theater in Mariupol; 3 years of colony for publishing posts about civilians killed in Ukraine [Svodka antivoennyh repressij 2021]. According to the article 20.3.3 of the Administrative Code ("discrediting the Armed Forces") the prosecution can be started based on the likes and comments on social media. The word "war" itself is considered as a discrediting one and can be used in the prosecution process under Article 20.3.3.

characterized by a high level of general trust, which is proven in the last question where the respondents were offered a blank space for any suggestions and concerns connected to the topic. There they revealed some outspoken and brave opinions with minimal political self-censorship.

Setting the scene

The actual word 'Irish' in the name of the dance style presupposes an ethnic connection to a specific group or location. However, in the modern world it is not the case anymore. As Gupta and Fergusson suggest "*the irony of these times, however, is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient*" [Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 10]. The territorial link, the boundaries of one locality, and the exclusive rights to a specific art form are the categories hardly attainable in the XXI century. Irish dance has become an internationally practiced artform even in the countries without a strong Irish diaspora (e. g. China, UAE, Mexico, Taiwan, Israel, Ukraine, and Russia).

Irish dance is also a multi-faceted style, it is not a homogeneous art form as it might seem. As Helena Wulff puts it, Irish dance actually exists on the continuum between the two poles of the 'crossroad dancing' (term used to describe a rural idyllic image of Ireland) and Riverdance [Wulff 2009] [1]. Here are a couple of examples of the substyles which the term 'Irish dance' unites:

- the competitive style (seen in touring shows such as Riverdance),
- sean-nós (the old style),
- North Kerry style (which originates back from 1700s),
- and Festival style (located in Northern Ireland).

The competitive style has been prevailing over the dance scene, thus creating an externally seeming image of an unvarying and unified dance genre practiced across Ireland. The biggest and the most prestigious competitions are held under the auspices of the oldest administrative body – An Coimisiún Le Rincí Gaelacha, founded by the members of the Gaelic League in 1927.

According to Skinner and Kringelbach, dance cultures are not static, but together with the translocal flows of people, images, and ideas they change and reshape [Kringelbach and Skinner 2012].

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[1] In the Irish dance studies the term 'crossroad dancing' is used to describe a rural idyllic image of Ireland where the dancing is happening on the crossroads. Riverdance – a world known shown which grew out of a Eurovision intermission piece and became a successful touring show.

In a nutshell, Irish dance in XXI century is a translocal artform, it shapes social life around itself through international competitions, summer and online workshops, and dance shows. The effect of that could be seen in the appearance of Irish dance schools around the world, which brings us to the case study of the research.

Case study

Irish dance schools spread around the world after the appearance of the show Riverdance in 1994 which introduced the world to this dance style. From that point the further development of the dance form is happening on local, national, and global level simultaneously [Foley 2001]. Mainland Europe and Russia experienced the Irish dance school boom in the early 2000. Consequently, the dancers of those newly opened schools got introduced to the social life of a 'typical Irish dancer' through dance classes with foreign guest teachers, international competitions, and performances.

However, as it has been said above, under the umbrella term 'Irish dance' there are a couple of different regional styles. The findings of the first part of this paper are based on the data collected in a school called "Festival Irish Dance" located in Moscow. The Festival style has originated from Northern Ireland and up to the most recent years it has been practiced exclusively in that region. This style is "*so called because the competitions, in which the dancers take part are at festivals that belong, in some cases, to the British Federation of Music Festivals*" [MacCafferty 2007: 24]. In other words, two different official organizations hold the competitions for the dancers of the South and North. Also, aesthetically being quite different from the mainstream competitive style, it plays a significant role in the self-identification of the Northern Irish dancers. According to an active Festival practitioner and teacher, dancers take special pride in the way they look and in their distinguishable repertoire. The slow speed of the music allows the dancers to become more submerged in the storytelling aspect of the dance, "*to move your audience, to connect with them*" [Sami Rantasalo 2014, 3: 15].

Even though the mainstream Irish dance became a recognizable trademark of Ireland with dance school sprouting around the world, information about Festival style outside of the original geographical borders is rather scarce. In contrast to the mainstream style which has its competitions around the world (e. g. the European Championship of 2024 is to be held in Romania), the Festival-competitions for Festival dancers are held only in Northern Ireland.

The Russian school of Festival Irish Dance was founded in 2018, though the schools of the mainstream style had been functioning in Russia since the early 2000s. However, since the outbreak of the pandemic the normal creative and social life of dance practitioners got suspended. The imposed challenges had to be faced in a new creative manner.

Building community in the times of detachment

The normal calendar year of an Irish dancer (no matter of which regional style) consists of the regular competitions, gigs, weekly classes, and rehearsals. These activities offer not solely a way of mastering the dancing skills, but also an opportunity of socializing. According to the dancers, adjudicators, and musicians, some of their best memories are made during these events. The shared experiences fortify the existing friendships and create new connections. With the abruption of these activities many practitioners experienced the sense of a broken lifestyle and moreover, with the inability to live the 'dancer's life', the loss of their self-identity as a dancer. All the activities got rechanneled to the online realm, where the classes helped the dancers to stay in shape, and even more importantly, to stay in touch with the community.

Even at the wake of technological era it was recognized that technology offers an innovative way of experiencing multiple identities [Kaplan and Turkle 1986]. This statement can be extended today – the online communities help keeping the existing identities alive. Since the extreme conditions of the pandemic years were also harmful for the psychological wellbeing, the online alternative gave a temporary substitute for the regular dance life. For many dancers the self-identification of Me-dancer is prevailing, and due to the shortness of a dancer's career, a skipped year of dance events becomes a huge gap. Zoom substitute offered a temporary solution and relief, which can "*illustrate how art can offer hope, relief, change, or an alternative view of the world in these turbulent times, and the international connections we hold and dialogues and practices in dance education around the world are flowing*" [Heyang and Martin 2021]. In the survey there is a category of replies that are highlighting the emotional support and relief provided by these online classes: "<*these classes give me*> beautiful *choreography, a sense of belonging to an international project, new dance skills*", "*positive emotions, my mood improves, vitality raises*", "*a charge of good mood, positivity, inspiration*" [Google survey 2022]. The online replica of the real in-studio dance classes "steadies" the mind and is seen by the practitioners as a bridge into the future 'normality' and habitual way of living [Skinner 2022].

The inability to participate in performances prompted the creation of a new way of artistic expression – the zoom dance videos. Dancers learned the steps online, recorded themselves, and sent the files for editing into one joined video, thus creating the illusion of dancing together. The videos themselves (at times recorded with poor quality, with the drying laundry in the background and pets running across the screen) might not be a part of a dancer's showreel, but they serve the purpose of reaching towards each other through the screen and uniting through one common task.

These regular activities helped to create a daily routine which became an important way of maintaining a healthy (mentally and physically) lifestyle in the

times of uncertainty. According to the dancers, the online format "*helped them to keep going*" [Google survey 2022]. Similar observations were made across the field, since the wellbeing (physical and emotional) "*is the routines that we are accustomed to and the expectations we have for our abilities and capacities. It is informed by our pasts and achieved into our futures*" [Skinner 2022: 89]. The experience of the participants resonates with the idea of communal creation of new shared spaces [Benthaus 2021]. In this case the dancer's body becomes a connecting tool: through repeating the steps demonstrated by the dance teacher on the small screen and observing others who are trying to repeat it, the dancers step onto the translocal scene. Thus is a network that facilitates the circulation of resources, practices, and ideas [Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013].

However, this 'dance life simulation' is lacking an important aspect also observed by the tango practitioners: dancing in your living room is a practice for the moment when all the restrictions will have been lifted and when people can return "*to the stranger's warm embrace*" [Skinner 2022: 90]. Time has proven for this observation to be on point: the dancers with Irish dance schools in their cities all returned to the offline classes when it became possible. The ones who stayed online are the immigrated dancers who physically cannot come to class.

An unexpected silver lining of the devastating pandemic outbreak was the growth of accessibility to dance related information. It led the way for "*decolonial, culturally relevant, and inclusive dance education*" [Heyang and Martin 2021: 311]. Festival dance style prior the years of pandemic was practiced almost exclusively in Northern Ireland. Even five years ago most of the Irish dancers, who had been brought up in the mainstream competitive tradition, were not familiar with the 'other' Irish dancing, that was happening side by side to them. For the dance teachers the loss of the stable income from conventional offline dance classes signified the beginning of the online era, which exposed the dance style to a wider audience. Before the introduction of online classes, the way of obtaining the new dance material was either through workshops in Ireland or thorough inviting the dance masters to the desired location. For foreign dancers the trips to Ireland required considerable financial expenditures often incompatible with the income level.[1] However, the online format offered an opportunity to join classes for a much lesser price (the average cost of a group Zoom class is 5 euros). Secondly, it opened a big variety of dance instructors, allowing the dancers to choose one.

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[1] The average monthly wage around Russia is approximately 600 euros (according to the pre-pandemic data of 2017 [Srednemesyachnaya nominal'naya nachislennaya zarabotnaya plata na odnogo rabotnika po polnomu krugu organizacij s 2017 g. 2017].

Lauren Smyth, one of the most distinguished Festival style popularizer, created an online platform the Lauren Smyth Academy, which is open for all Irish dancers of all organizations and schools [Lauren Smyth Academy 2023]. It grew out of Zoom classes and got popular with dancers around the world: there are dancers from Italy, China, Norway, Serbia, Japan, Canada, USA, Austria, Mexico etc. Prior the online teaching Lauren had been a Riverdance principal dancer for 10 years, however the touring life stopped with the pandemic outbreak, creating a lot of uncertainty for the future, and causing identity crisis. The formation of an online community had a therapeutical side effect. As Lauren puts it, "*I'm just so grateful for them and what they've pushed me to achieve in the past year. It kind of help need to be more settled and fulfilled in who I am and what I'm doing*" [Interview with Lauren 2022]. Dance teachers also had to learn how to promote themselves using the social media and to rethink the habitual way of presenting dance material [Lay 2021]. The growing accessibility of the international dance institutions of various sort is a general trend of the pandemic: attending Cunningham technique dance classes, or workshops of the principal dancers of major ballet companies, taking part in the online streaming – these are just a few of the opened opportunities [Benthaus 2021].

For the Russian school of Festival Irish dance, the shift to the virtual methods of teaching had also signified a certain expansion. Dancers from Norway, Cyprus, Portugal, remote Siberian cities got an opportunity to practice it with the associate teacher Jenna Hamill from Northern Ireland. According to the dancers, some "*live in a place where there is no school and no opportunity to start one*", or "*there's no Irish dance school in my town*", "*I live thousands of kilometers away from the teachers of the Festival style, which I really wanted to try*" [Google survey 2022]. The dance class literally came into their houses.

This process can be called the democratization of a very exclusive, in a regional sense, dance style. The restraints have opened new ways of spreading awareness about Festival, making it more accessible to a wider range of dancers. Now anyone with a computer and access to the Internet can learn it and thus become a part of the international community of Festival dancers.

The dance in this context is playing the part of connecting glue for the communities that otherwise would never come together. It has been well stated that "*it is difficult to think of the earth as a 'lonely planet' any more*" [Plant 2004: 62]. The online community is creating a safe space for a common dialogue mediated by dance. The conventional way of communicating ideas through the spoken language which has its shortages connected to misunderstanding is substituted by a universal dance language. Thus, the online format has also made another small step towards decolonizing the process of learning by opening the access to the information to a wider audience (the economical, communicational, spatial limitations become

surmountable). The strategies elaborated under the pressure of COVID have proven that even the major challenges can be turned to the advantages. Online world became a platform for creating new cultural spaces, where the online-based community is formed around a shared interest.

Breaking community

The second part of the research is centered around another type of detachment cause by the war time. As it has been said above, when the war started all the old ways felt meaningless. However, that is the time when social connections come to the forefront.

The concept of detachment in this case is expressed in other ways: detachment as migration, emotional detachment from one's nation-state, loss of one of the ways of self-identification, ostracism of Russian communities on the international arena. Different worldviews are fueling the heated debate between family members, teachers, dance schools, dancers, or communities which might lead to the break of those links. As the starting quote of the article states, "*how can I dance if the people are dying*" [Google survey 2022]. That is the matter of primary importance. However, when the old world is shattered the importance of the old existing cultural and social practices increase. These issues also become visible in the group identity expressed through dance.

The observed characteristic of the war era is the abruption of the official connections with the remaining interpersonal ones. The main Irish dancing organization – An Coimisiún Le Rincí Gaelacha has announced that "*from 24th March 2022 and until further notice, dancers from Russia will not be allowed to participate, in any way, in competitions or events, registered under the auspices of An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha*" [Official Statement from An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha 2022]. This decision has been made regardless of the code of conduct of the organization which separately distinguishes Political Neutrality status: "*An Coimisiún is a non-political organisation and shall seek to achieve its objectives and carry out its functions in a completely apolitical manner*" [An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha 2016].. This applies also to the dancers who left Russia after the start of the war or those who openly express their anti-war position.

Generally, the key for keeping the community alive is the common activities and events which allow to create shared experiences. As it has been shown in the example with COVID, they can be temporary substituted by the online format, but a complete stop of the flow of ideas and communication has a hidden threat. The social isolation of the dancers, especially the young ones from the international community might have saddening consequences, as they are missing out on the ability to meet people of different cultural backgrounds. As Arendt claims, the state of isolation and

the sense of being left out makes people the prime target for a totalitarian movement. The loss of the sense of community also leads to the loss of self-identity [Arendt 1973]. According to the concept of multiple identities, they might rank within each individual. For many dancers the "Me-dancer" aspect is the prevailing one. Among the 116 replies in the survey show that when continuing the phrase "Dancing to me is…" shows that only 8 identified it as purely "*sport*". Among the popular replies was: "*it's my life*" or "*an integral part of life*", "*way of self-fulfillment*", "*family*" [Google survey 2022]. The inability to be a part of the community life creates the sense of isolation, both physical and emotional.

Not being amidst the war zone and having the illusion of the 'normal' life the replies to the "*Has the war affected my dancing life?*" vary from "*not really*" to "*my dancing life has lost its direction*" [Google survey 2022]. At the same time, some note the trend "*that the Russian community of Irish dancers is becoming more united in the process of solving common problems*" [Google survey 2022]. Despite the seemingly positive dynamic of bringing people together it also brings to the table the issue of "us / them", often characterized by putting labels with "them" becoming even more so alienized. The loss of the link with the bigger international community is seen as "insignificant" only by 2 respondents out of 116. Among other replies we see:

> "*< it is> important, because it expands the boundaries in my head*"; "*<It means> to be a free person*"; "*The most valuable thing is that people from this field, who have done a lot for its development, share their knowledge and experience with you. It is a sense of community and value in what you do*"; "*It's important because dancing and art in general are things that unite people and knowing that in almost any country you could find like-minded crazy dancers was a great motivation to continue doing it*" [Google survey 2022].

54% of the respondents claimed that now they experience the sense of isolation from the international community.

However, the interpersonal connections and friendships that had been created in the pre-war time remain strong: "*As we've been told, Irish dance has never been a weapon in war*" [Google survey 2022]. Even though the dance teachers cannot travel with workshops, and the dancers are not allowed to take part in competitions, the communication remains in the online sphere. The interpersonal style of communication in not always aligned with agenda of the official discourse.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to come back to my initial research questions and briefly outline the results of the findings. The purpose of the current study was to explore the concept of **detachment** and its effect on the community of Irish dance

practitioners. The dancing community, which is normally shaped by the shared activities, has the inner driving force of maintaining these connections even in the times of detachment. This could be seen in the example of the pandemic years, when the new ways of expressing creativity were discovered. As an example, the proactive adaptation to the new realia, has transformed Festival style into a more global phenomenon. Through this process the dancers may experience the sense of belonging to a bigger and supporting community. Without being present in the same space, dancers experience the sense of unity through relation to the common art form and working on joined artistic projects. The social aspect of dance for some practitioners comes to the forefront (as the respondents refer to it, "*The reason why I'm actually doing this for*", and "*They play a bigger role than feises (competitions)*", "*Breath of fresh air*") [Google survey 2022]. The example of COVID-19 showed the positive dynamics in the sense of emotional connection and community building even when facing the spacial distance. However, the speed of breaking of the social connections is close to instant, as it has been shown in the example of war time. Though this rupture happens predominantly at the institutional level, the interpersonal relationships (if people priorly had had some personal contact) remain untacked.

The second aim of this study was to investigate the ways of forging multiple identities, as dance gives the opportunity to experience multiple ones. The inability to reach the full dance potential at the time of self-isolation has created a lot of uncertainty and pushed the practitioners to go off the beaten track. Once again, the dancing community has played an important role by expressing support and going through the trying times as one unity. Conversely, the inability to be a full member of it might cause the crisis of community belonging. Simultaneously, the propaganda machine receives more power behind the shut doors, drawing the unambiguous image of "us" versus "them". The social aspect of dance has a great influence both on the emotional wellbeing of each individual, and on the worldview of the practitioners having the ability of broadening the vision of the world: "*Almost everyone in our dance community are pacifists. Including teenage kids who get a ton of propaganda at school. It's amazing for me and it gives hope*" [Google survey 2022]. Dance creates opportunity to express resistance and freedom through our bodies by linking people from completely different backgrounds and opening the ways for a deep artistic dialogue.

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