

COMING TOGETHER – EXTENDED ARTISTIC DIALOGUE

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Abstract

This article is based on three performance papers, which started as a cocreated performance project based on a Greek myth in the autumn of 2021 and continued in 2022. A transdisciplinary artistic collective consisting of an oral storyteller, a choreographer/director, and a textile artist take a closer look at our experiences and what we named as “the extended artistic dialogue”. With the research question: what can recognize an extended artistic dialogue? the article discusses what is needed in an extended artistic dialogue. The collaboration created a togetherness at the same time embracing the specialty from each artform. The artistic process was vibrant and dynamic as it continuously changed along the way, developing the scenarios in the performance and one’s own poetic. Listening opens the participatory process and was an experiencing for new knowledge and interpreting the experience. Our experience is that the extended artistic dialogue through the artistic processes creates relational places where the artforms flourish through respectful, inclusive, and equitable treatment of others sharing professional information, knowledge, and ideas.

Keywords: *performance, dialogue, listening, artistic research.*

Culture Crossroads

Volume 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol22.436>

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ISSN: 2500-9974



Strangers?

“Once we were stranger in a myth, trying to rearticulate who we were and where we are” [Dahlsveen, Bryhn, & Kvellestad 2022]. This quote is from a performance paper, we, the authors, carried out in the spring of 2022. The paper was an extended and transformed version of a performance in November 2021 (see Figure 1). We were strangers to each other when the process began in June 2021, while now we know each other privately and professionally.

The project that forms the basis of this article, was part of a European project called OnLife. The aim of the project was to create an online performance and tried out a temporary transdisciplinary artistic collective consisting of an oral storyteller, a textile artist, and a choreographer/director, who are also the authors of this article.

Talking and discussing was consistent throughout the project and created the groundwork for scenarios in the performance. The conversations in our process were extended by including movements, scenarios, stories, embroideries as well as the audience. In this article, we aim to take a closer look at the research question: *what can recognize an extended artistic dialogue?*

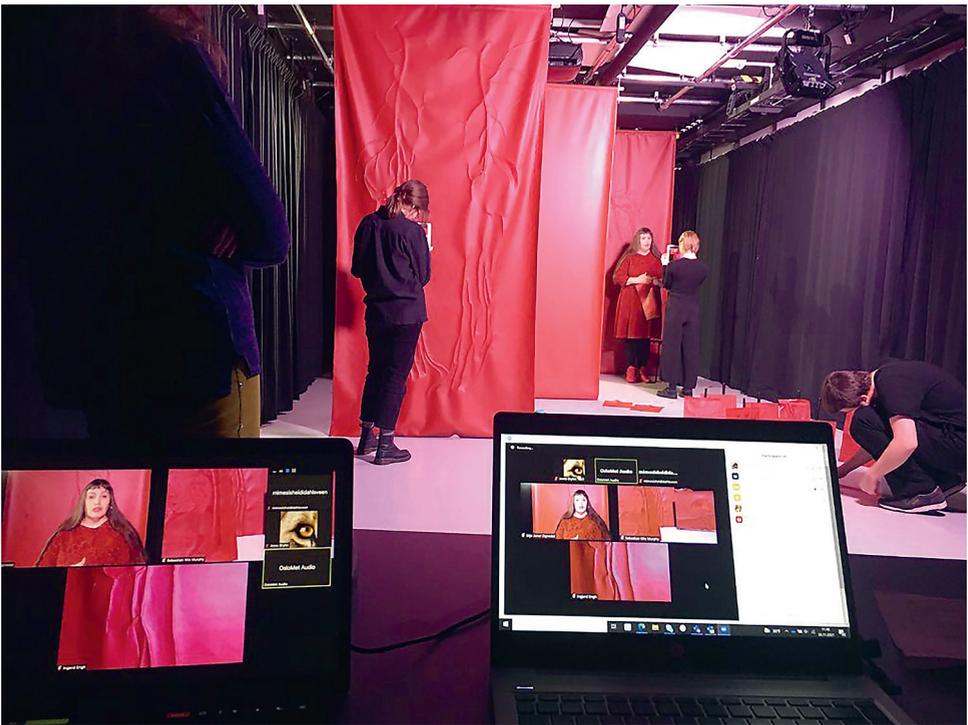


Figure 1. Photo from the performance, taken by Anne Bryhn.

We try to locate elements that were present to make the artistic process propulsion, while at the same time preserving the integrity of the individual. The article is based on both the work with and implementation of the online performance, as well as performance papers carried out after the performance.

The method – talking

We started working six months before the performance, exploring the Greek myth about the Minotaur in the maze and the connection between us as creative partners. Turning our practice into a digitized version was something we had not done before. We lacked both knowledge and expertise in the process and had to remedy this by constant trials and discussions.

Nicolas Bourriaud argues that the reality of the contemporary is montages, where one understands temporary versions of reality. The aesthetics is about editing this into works of art [Bourriaud 2009: 35]. Our performance is built around the montage principle, which we experience as dialogical; it gives room for different artistic voices to express themselves in one common process and work. The fundamental in all art is the dialogue, argues the philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) [Buber 2002: 30].

According to the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), every utterance is dialogic as it is part of a context [Mørch 2003: 13]. Furthermore, Bakhtin writes that a verbal event is a social phenomenon [Bakhtin 1981: 271] like in this process, where we had to talk to get to know each other both privately and professionally. The dialogue is linked to the human potential of creating meaning [Dysthe 2006: 457] and thus the dialogue is a basic condition for the human [Dysthe 2006: 463].

In its being, a dialogue can be unfinished and unpredictable and seeking [Åsvoll 2006: 449]. In our case, we came from different artistic fields and thus we had different positions and horizons of understanding. A dialogue interacts these positions into a new composition [Åsvoll 2006: 449].

One of the concepts of Bakhtin is *addressivity*, an utterance contains two voices and the meeting between the two creates meaning [Bakhtin 1981]. Furthermore, Bakhtin argues that the meaning is not the direct meaning of the word, but the meaning depends on the position of the speakers, the way it is said and the context in which utterance resides [Bakhtin 1981: 401]. Through the ongoing dialogue we were able to sort out what was important in the process towards a performance. We were aware of each other's positions and respected the artistic background and the competence everyone brought into the concept.

Bakhtin also introduced the term *heteroglossia*, that covers the multifaceted: “the simultaneous use of different kinds of speech or other signs, the tension between them, and their conflicting relationship within one text” [Ivanov 2000: 100].

As we came from different disciplines, we carried different professional languages. Heteroglossia is the opposite of the dominant use of one language and considers the different points of view in a dialogue where every word brings a potential of conciliators and contradictions [Ivanov 2000: 101].

Buber claims that the fundamental movement in a dialogue is to turn towards the other: “If you look at someone and address him you turn to him, of course with the body, but also in the requisite measure with the soul, in that you direct your attention to him” [Buber 2002: 22]. Moreover, a dialogue is not only the verbal and vocal communication, but dialogue also involves being able to interact in silence [Härkönen & Stöckell 2019: 640] where listening is a key competence. Listening to others is listening to oneself [Härkönen & Stöckell 2019: 643]. Through movement, signs and listening, dialogue can be extended to include aesthetic elements as we see it.

Listening as the foundation for progress

Listening is a central part of the dialogue, it takes place both on the emotional level and on the level of reason and is characterized by a mixture of subjectivism and objectivism, closeness, and distance [Roe & Hertzberg 1999: 161]. For us, listening became a reference, as things said in a practice session would be discussed in another session. This strengthens the interpretation part of listening. Listening requires processing but is also an instrument to be able to improvise in a here and now moment. Listening opens the participatory process in which each participant is “operating as a key contributor in the meaning-making” [Grehan 2020: 54]. When our process began by talking to each other, we gradually switched to improvising scenarios that would build the performance. This gave a reassurance in the improvised as we carried references due to the listening. Helena Grehan promotes slow listening: “It is an act in which the listener is attuned to the speaker in a way that makes room for a range of responses – the possibility of deep understanding and agreement, for partial acceptance, for dissonance or disagreement as well as for misunderstanding” [Grehan 2020: 55]. This is supported by our experience, listening provides a space with many possibilities. This perspective includes flexibility and fluidity – a collaboration in motion [Anderson 2012; Kvellestad 2018].

Listening made the textile artist becoming a performing artist in this project. It gave her the confidence to perform the art of embroidery as a scenic act. Furthermore, through the sound of a needle passing through a thick fabric, a rhythm is created that gave the storyteller a focus “to lean” the verbal words towards. Through listening, the individual performer is given a room for interpretation where there are contradictions and contrasts present [Grehan 2020: 56] that can serve as scenic suggestions.

According to David Wills, listening is “the technology that transforms the sound we hear and mediates its contact with the body and, so to speak, the mind”

[Wills 2015: 74]. Listening is a bodily presence in the room, a movement where one is aware of the other performers.

Movement and listening were two different layers around and between us, the performers, it changed the performance and thus the atmosphere in the room.

It can be a challenge and it takes time to find a common pulse on stage. Through the process we trained our ability to sense the others in the room; we learned to listen through the body. Listening with the whole body, builds a good collaboration on stage. Temporalities become sharpened and the associations for the performers widened:

Text, body and space produce a musical, architectonic and dramaturgical constellation that results from predefined as well as “unplannable” moments: everyone present senses their presence, sounds, noises, position in space, the resonance of steps and of words. It induces them to be careful, circumspect and considerate with respect to the whole of the situation, paying attention to silence, rhythm and movement [Lehman 2021: 137].

In this way, listening expands the possibilities of creating a common artistic work.



Figure 2. Photo from rehearsal, taken by Anne Bryhn.

The three voices

In the process, each artist had their distinctive voice, we will say something about the process from different points of view:

The storyteller

In the performance, the Greek myth is combined with autobiographical material. The myth about the Minotaur in maze or the labyrinth is, in short, about Crete and Minos, the king, breaking a promise he has made to the gods to sacrifice a white bull born out of the sea. A curse is cast over Minos and this causes his queen to mate with the white bull and then give birth to a boy who is half human and half bull. The architect Daedalus builds a maze in which the boy is placed. Finally, the monster is killed by Theseus, a young hero.

In the story we perform, we look at the good life where the material floods and that the good life also disregards something, something must be sacrificed. It is present in the myth, an experience of a culture in a heyday, at the expense of what is different. We used the myth to express something about the present time. By comparing the myth with the present, a dialogue is created, a talk between the traditional material and the contemporary time.

When I tell traditional stories in the present, I use my own experiences to understand both the story and the present:

Minos walked the bull through the streets of Knossos to show it off. He locked it in his own garden. There he was standing and looking at the bull. As he stood like this, he thought, "What a beautiful creature. It would be a shame to sacrifice such a bull. I think I will sacrifice my own bulls!" As said so done, Minos sacrificed seven of his own bulls, the sacrificial smoke rose to heaven and the people partied after the sacrifice.

Gods cannot be fooled. That night, the sea god Poseidon rose furiously out of the sea, with his fierce fork. His shadow lay all over Crete, and only with his gaze did Poseidon send a curse to Minos.

Once I was in Athens, I was there on a job and the commissioners wanted me to see some of Athens. It was January, it was raining. We went up to the Acropolis and all the way, the commissioners told the bit of Greek history. I was both tired and lightheaded by all the talk, what was the point of dragging me up that way for me to see a ruin in grey weather, rain, and fog? [Dahlsveen 2021]

The quote from the performance shows how I combine the myth with an autobiographical episode, the transition between these two stories is abrupt. Such abrupt breaks between fictional and own experience were used in several places throughout the performance and represent the unknown that may arise in a dialogue.

In the quote, there is a personal event, a desire to create a connection to the myth so that it relates to others and me, the motives in the narrative are not only action-bound by a narrative structure but can account for something outside the specific storytelling world that is formulated through the myth.

The transitions between concrete experiences of lived life and what I choose to call fictional experiences is something I often use as a storyteller to highlight the current aspect of a traditional narrative. In this move, I reveal myself as a storyteller, I take a position that one can be critical of, the danger is that I interpret the material for the listener.

My own experiences create a relationship with the Greek myth I tell. I choose the traditional material based on my own experience – the traditional material gives me more memories from my own experiences – and the narrative becomes a dialogical place over this reflection. This cyclic process between my experience and the fictional experience creates a wealth of opportunities that is visible through telling the traditional and autobiographical in combination. In this way, a foundation for the performance is created and, in the mixing, and abrupt meetings, I open the material for other expressions.

The textile artist

When the needle sticks through, there are scars, but rather small scars. “Craftsmanship is about telling a story with your hands” [Hayes 2018: 3] reflects not only a mark of quality, but it also represents a set of standards that embody skill, functionality, and sustainability. I analyzed the craft and the technic to get into the core of the embroidery activity. There is a symbiosis between needle, thread, fabric, and hands, where each part is dependent on the others. For what is a needle without thread or thread without a needle? What is the needle and thread without hands; who take the lead, the command, and the responsibility? With these questions to the audience, I wanted a break, an abruption, to stimulate reflection about the craft. The embroidery created a voice through big panels and small pictures.

Furthermore, the sewing fabric is creative crucial for the stitches and the threads. Through the movement of the needle, the stitch, whether small or long, is fundamental. The whole embroidery depends on the little stitches. If the little stitch disappears, the embroidery disappears.

The red synthetic leather panels with silk embroidery used in the performance, is not an obvious combination, but this increases the novelty of the materials. Exploration continued in dialogue with the simple stitch and material and combinations with different stitch densities, lengths, and directions. The embroideries, both the long and the small ones, were included as non-human participants in the performance and the performance papers to achieve an extended dialogue with the audience (see Figure 2).

The material's dull surface provided resistance to the needle, and when the stitches tightened, a relief arose rising from a two-dimensional surface. Applying only one-color inspired creativity and innovation with new expressions in the material. The panels are individual narratives where the material creates ethereal associations to animal's anatomy, veins and tendons, the things we cannot see. That narrative is a thread of truth. The embroidery is associated with the mythical narrative with the veins unfolding and surfaces billowing and thus has a dialogical association arose when you listen with the eyes and gently touching the surface.

Richard Sennet highlights the curiosity of the material, which is crucial for making quality, creating a work with great respect that derives meaning from the work [Sennett 2008]. Targeted craftsmanship is an important part of the creation; something that is not presumed but achieved.

For quality is a likely outcome when you spend time and have patience with the embroidery in the design process. There is a binding working relationship between the artist and the material. Questions are asked, tests are evaluated, new test must be made, new questions must be asked and, thus, the work and research are established [Kvellestad 2018]. The material-based creation is slow, and courage and patience are important factors. To embroider takes time and time is visible, this visibility gives the embroidery respect [Robach 2013].

The choreographer/director

The movements of a dialogue were extended in the online performance. The performance in November 2021 was on the video platform zoom. The logged in audience then entered a window divided in three screens in front of them. In the online performance, the storyteller, the textile artist, and the textile were moving in the actual room we were in and at the same time the three cameras/iPads were also moving, as if the audience entered in the middle of an ongoing dialogue.

Our talk together in the process was to get to know each other both privately and professionally. A safe environment was built through these dialogues and the necessity of making a safe environment among all of us, the participants, involving in a performance is always crucial for me to reach natural embodied movements on stage. When the participants relax, they let go of some of their own awareness and start to listen to each other's words and movements. At this point the dialogue between everybody and everything in the performance room starts to work and the dialogue with the audience through the camera gives an extra nerve and excitement in the participants' presentation.

The consciousness of focus, space and movement dynamics is important. Using three visual screens where the performers, textile and the three cameras in movement, creates a lot of visuality going on at the same time. Making sure that the orality of the

story did not disappear in all the visuals, was important. Using our process to practise the participants' presence on stage made an embodied awareness and listening to each other in the room also created a focus. When moving to another space, the temporality in both the movement and the vocals indicated where the focus on camera would be. Getting that consciousness to highlight the abrupt breaks both visually and orally strengthen the dialogue with the audience.

The movements in the textile artist sewing do not illustrate the text from the storyteller, or vice versa, but the connection between them will be created by the audience [Leirvåg 2016: 46]. Raising awareness of both the textile artist's and the storyteller's presence in the room makes a visual balance between them that amplifies the dialogue with the audience through the cameras: "Strategies of space and spacing may disperse signs and symbols, allowing the spectators to construct their own stories" [Lehman & Primavesi 2009: 5].

Dynamic differences are unique in each body. To search and develop your own uniqueness demands practice. Rudolf Laban (1879–1958) said that it is the birthright of every man to dance. Deep down all human has a desire to just let go and dance, just for the sheer joy of it [Newlove & Dalby 2004: 10]. My task as a choreographer/director is to trigger the participants to find this joy. The effect will be a connection in between the participants and between the participants and the audience communicating a silent bodily dialogue.



Figure 3. Still-photo from video of performance paper.

By using iPads as camera, we could play and explore distances in between the participants. Moving through closeups and further distances, different speed, and angles we were able to give the audience an experience of closeness to the story, the storyteller, the stiches, the embroidery in addition to the textile artist and her needles.

The dialogue with the audience

The performance's meeting with the audience took place in an online room, and this could seemingly lower the dialogical work we had during the process. We live in a time when digital practices are considered performative cultures and it is difficult to avoid being influenced by the technology in our work [Leeker, Schipper, & Beyes 2017: 10]. Digital technology is no longer just a tool but forms its own culture. The advantages of the technology are that it itself does not carry feelings and intended actions, but in our situation the online space depends on us filling it up with meaning – making experiences that one can reflect on. It was thus our task to create a digital space that provided both an experience and a reflection.

If we follow Bakhtin's thoughts on addressivity, there will be an indirect dialogue present if we consider the performance as an utterance. During the performance, we took advantage of this, by addressing "a you" directly as in the following quote from the performance: "Maybe you have even been there. An airflight, slept under the sun with a newly purchased bikini, been to a restaurant, filled up your plate and ate half. After all, we have Oil" [Dahlsveen, Kvellestad, & Bryhn, Broderi og fortelling 2021]. Through the use of "a you", the purpose was to give the audience a sense of being directly involved.

During the performance there were small dialogues between the storyteller and the textile artist, here the textile artist could represent the voice of the addressivity, where the storyteller verbally carried the main story. The textile artist's voice and point of view represented the one that reflected on what was told. At one point the textile artist looked straight into the video camera as a comment on the presence of both the performers and the audience. The textile artist's presence through the physical movements associated with the embroidery was also a form of response to the narrative. These responses were to prolong a line of thought in an ever searching for meaning. The textile artist's verbal and non-verbal responses represented an addressee and thus helped to create meaning in the performance.

We asked the online audience to drink tea, bring spices and something to write with and on. During the performance we instructed them to for instance smell the spice etc. This was both to give a feeling of community despite the distance, and to connect the myth to experiences, but also to create a form of dialogue with listeners.

During the performance, we asked the audience to write down some words based on what they experienced: "power, invisibility, anger, peace, dedication,

wonder, curious, different, courage, grief, strength, life” [Dahlsveen, Kvellestad, & Bryhn, Broderi og fortelling 2021]. These words are interpreted as expressions of addressivity and provide space for the audience to express themselves. But we do not know what has triggered the words, whether it was the use of the space, an embroidery, a movement, the autobiographical narratives, or the like. What it tells us is that there is a large room for interpretation present in a dialogue between the individual and the performance and this provides many opportunities to spin on, as the paper performances did.

The paper performances had elements of the performance (see Figure 3), but expanded to include three performers in the room, as well as bringing theory in to discuss our findings. Here a new space arose where the theory became a new dialogical partner or perhaps one can say that the theory became a structuring factor in the dialogue. The theory helped us sort our findings and gave us ideas we could discuss.

Furthermore, into the paper performances, we took with us elements that extended the dialogue. We gave photos from the process to the audience, which they could choose whether to take or give back to us. The textile artist asked the audience direct questions and commented on the embroidery to open the audience’s room of interpretation. After the paper performances, we felt that the audience had a need to come and discuss what they had experienced, whether it was the expression or the content. We believe this is due to our dialogical form of working.

The extended artistic dialogue

We consider extended artistic dialogue to be both artistically method-developing and a relational place to be. We ask at the beginning of this article, *what can recognize an extended artistic dialogue?* Heteroglossia is central as it allows many voices that are both visual, verbal, and vocal. Buber emphasizes the movement in a dialogue as both bodily and spiritual. Thus, the extended artistic dialogue is not bound by the verbal word but accommodates many artistic expressions that are nuances and shadows and hints of interpretations.

Our experience is that the expanded artistic dialogue through the artistic processes creates relational places. In the relational places the artistic and creative expression arose, both in words and actions.

This preserves the unique and artistic voice, while at the same time creating a collective expression. The key is to be able to listen through a common bodily pulse.

The voice in an extended artistic dialogue speaks through the even rhythm of a needle and the desire to move in a room. The extended artistic dialogue contains artistic uniqueness and a collective’s need to communicate in a presence with others. The dialogue enriches the different artforms focus and presence on stage. The challenge can be the balance in between them. We used the benefit of our different

voices to build a performance using methods to create an aesthetic balance between these unique voices. These heuristic methods involve discovery, “instead of merely being told what to do” [McCaw 2018: 41]. We believe that these discoveries through the artistic dialogues give the performers a better understanding of the dynamics that will benefit the performance.

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