

Performing Arts Organisations and initiatives Advocacy Initiatives EU response All Europe Countries Sweden Creative Europe Community Working Conditions

The Body Politic: Contemporary Dance and Europe's Cultural Compass Strategy

CREATIVESUNITE

Co-funded by the European Union

The European Dance Network's manager, Eva Broberg, discusses the future of cultural policy, the need to defend the Creative Europe program and why contemporary dance deserves a central role in the EU's Cultural Compass framework.

Eva Broberg, network manager of the European Dance Development Network (EDN), joins us from her Stockholm office to discuss the critical moment facing European cultural policy. As the EU develops its Cultural Compass framework, Broberg advocates for a fundamental shift in how Brussels approaches contemporary dance as a vital force for social cohesion, mental health, and European identity. She also calls upon Brussels to hold and secure the recognition of the intrinsic value of the Arts by keeping the Creative Europe programme intact.

CU. What's the strategic vision that the Cultural Compass framework should take in Europe, particularly regarding contemporary dance?

EB. I should start with some context about contemporary dance culture in Europe. It's a very diverse sector, with independent workers who elude institutionalism. It's progressive and inventive, which is likely one of the reasons why young audiences and artists are so engaged with this art form. So, when it comes to the Cultural Compass vision, my mind goes to the “European identity” that the EU is struggling with-the need to encounter the diversity we have in different nations. It's about showing the pluralism of Europe. And that is why culture and art are the forces we need to strengthen this identity. In terms of cultural policy, dance is quite a young art form. In several European countries, it was only in the 1990s and early 2000s that it gained recognition as a standalone art form, distinct from theater or general performing arts. As a result, its

visibility and institutional support are still developing in many contexts.

CU. There's an ongoing debate about art as a value versus culture connected with social functions and needs, like education or mental health. How should this be addressed in policy?

EB. I want the arts and artistic practices to be visible in the budget of different departments, to recognise what arts and dance, in particular, are doing. But art also needs to have its standalone intrinsic value appreciated. It's so important to support art for its own sake and not as an instrument for other things that I wish I didn't have to advocate for it. However, It seems that in discussions with the Commission, EU, and Parliament these days, we need to put this on the front line.

CU. On the other hand, out of all the arts, dance is maybe the one that has been connected the most with wellbeing, whether that is health, mental health, education, or even soft skills' development. Why not enhance that aspect?

EB. Dance can support the development of emotional and personal resilience—it resists uncertainty and stress. It's been proven time and again that it develops social awareness and helps grow empathy. We live in societies that cause illness, both physical and mental. Dance is not only a way to treat symptoms of social woes, such as unemployment or growing isolation, to name a few, but it can also go deeper, helping create a sense of connection, inclusion, and togetherness. But we will fail to acknowledge the true societal value of dance or any other form of art if we miss the intrinsic value of art in our vision.

CU. How does contemporary dance relate to European identity differently than, say, folk dance, which is rooted in heritage and preservation?

EB. Folk dance is part of the ecosystem. But is it really about preserving values? I think it's more about rituals, belonging, and groups. Values are constantly developing—they can still be conservative, but they are contemporary. So, contemporary dance is not only an art form; it's also a societal value. Roots are super important—knowing where you come from is part of the whole historical narrative. But contemporary dance is of now - it has the most radical and progressive part of identity research.



Let me give you an example. I read about a Swedish journalist who went to an Irish concert in Stockholm with his daughters. He noticed that the younger generation brings up their cell phones—you see these blue lights and can't see the artist. But what he realised was they're not filming the artist—they're filming themselves listening to the Irish artist. It's their culture today, so detached from the body. What does it do to people constantly watching themselves from the outside? It brings hollowness, insecurity, self-hatred, and mental illness.

Here comes contemporary dance through the notion of embodiment. It requires you to be present. It needs you in your body. It leads you to investigate, to research your own identity. It's not only about the world around you; it's also about you in the world. No one is just one-dimensional, but if you're not in yourself, how will you know?

CU. Let me turn to more concrete policy issues. There's a long discussion about the working conditions of creatives and artists, indeed. What are the challenges facing your sector when it comes to conditions and sustainability?

EB. I'd like to challenge the European Commission to think about long-term funding of the Arts and not only project-based programmes. The Commission already admits that arts-driven

transformation can't happen without a sustainable working environment. We can develop sustainable environments through better working conditions, but also through supporting cultural spaces—the critical nodes for artistic creation and community interaction. Education, media, theatres, studios, and public spaces, spaces aren't just buildings—they're an essential part of the ecosystem.

CU. Spaces operate in local or regional settings. How much of what you consider to be essential depends on European policy, and how much is about national or even regional policy?

EB. It is if you see it from the perspective of mobility. Artists move where they have better conditions to work. What's happening now is that even in supposedly good places, you see people leaving the scene—great artists, great expertise, and competence—because it's not possible to survive long-term due to precarity. For example, social security is always nation-based, so it's a concrete demand to provide insurance beyond borders for people who move. This is an EU issue. Then it's visa issues. Mobility in dance is global. Most of the dancers want a larger exchange globally.

CU. Does precarity influence artistic production, or is it irrelevant to the creative process?

EB. Without sustainability, trust, or security, it's a case of living from hand to mouth. Things are vastly different in different European countries. Some countries provide support between projects, enabling you to be secure during periods between contracts, which allows for long-term career investment. This enables you to develop your practice over time rather than constantly scrambling for the next opportunity. But there are also completely blind spots in Europe, where it's extremely difficult to work in contemporary dance at all.

CU. There have been growing incidents of suppression of freedom of expression in the arts across Europe. How does this affect dance specifically?

EB. I know about cases in Bulgaria, Hungary, Germany, Slovakia, and Greece. And I can give you an example from Sweden, too. When a children's cultural programme included an Arabic-speaking puppet theatre, local politicians, led by the nationalist-conservative party, were so provoked that they altered the policy to support only cultural initiatives rooted in the norms that have shaped Swedish society. ou have censorship in places you couldn't ever imagine. Freedom of expression is very particular for dance. It's an art form that's less understood because it's not narrative or oral, so it's the first

Co-funded by the European Union

one you'd like to cut because it feels less familiar. But it also has this power to say things that cannot be said otherwise—like a court jester who could tell the king truths no one else would. When you have powers moving in an authoritarian direction, this is where you want to cut down completely the ability to have a free voice.

CU. Looking ahead, what changes do you hope to see?

EB. I think it's fascinating to follow the UNESCO conference in Barcelona in October, where they're saying they will go for a standalone goal to establish culture in development strategies, to have cultural rights guaranteed for all. How is the EU going to align and get on top of this? We need to recognise contemporary dance and other art forms not just as art forms or instruments to serve social functions, but as powerful social and political voices. To achieve that, we need to build cross-border, intersectional structures that put artists at the centre of contributing to European society's future.

CU. To conclude, what specific actions would you like to see taken within the Culture Compass framework?

EB. The super urgent one for us is the recognition of dance as a distinct form of Art. Dance is often poorly represented or completely missing from cultural statistics. Eurostat struggles with disaggregated data on small and mobile sectors like dance and freelance cultural work. Politicians need to get a much better understanding of the value and power dance has. The second is to improve our professional working conditions. This can be about mobility and fair remuneration, but it is also about research, education, and residencies. Third would be freedom of expression and cultural rights. How is the Cultural Compass going to ensure it has vision and freedom of expression, and that cultural rights are at the forefront? This includes all aspects: the social, the well-being, the accessibility, and the equality aspect. It has everything in it, and at the same time, it is the force to make change happen.

Eva Broberg is the network manager of the European Dance Development Network (EDN), which advocates for contemporary dance culture across Europe from offices in Stockholm, Berlin, Ljubljana, Barcelona, and Milan.

Co-funded by
the European Union