

## Labification – metaphor or practice? || Collective research experiment NO. 1. and other experiences

A collaborative writing of Eva Bubla, Bernadett Jobbágy, Szilvia Vivi Papp (HUFA Doctoral School), and Dominika Drótos (HUFA Painting Department)

At the request and with the support of the HUFA WP2 LAB team, four of us students created and held the space for an experimental, performative and installative research activity entitled **Collective Research Experiment NO. 1**. In the framework of this 60-minute program, we had the time to offer something to the participants – representatives of international art academies. Instead of ‘just’ presenting our works, we agreed to use this time actively as part of our research, and do something that was also instructive and relevant for us in our own processes.

The experiment started with a somatic, sensory tuning-in, or *bodystorming* as it was referred to, led by Detti and Eva, with exercises that facilitate the arrival of the audience at both the physical space of the conference and the space within one’s own body and mind. Then, using these experiences, participants were encouraged to explore the library space with the help of a map, visiting various installative and performative stations related to our research:

/various adaptations of installation Designated Breathing Zone by Eva

The different versions of Designated Breathing Zone - incubated plants, olfactory imprints of local environments - invited the audience to take some breaths and reflect on the issue of air quality and the importance of green areas and plants in tackling pollution levels.

/a Tactile Space by Detti

Besides what the Library itself can offer, we installed a dedicated space to tune in the sense of touch, which - together with the perception of movement - are the first senses to develop. They provide a baseline for the development of the other senses and underline our further experiences.

/'Lapsúlyos || Certain solitude' video installation by Detti

Moving image is perceived primarily as visual (and audio) content. Our vision is the last sense to develop, and - underlined by hearing and vestibular mechanism - helps us to connect to the world and orientate in space. But what do screened images trigger in our body? How do I respond? Do I use my touch sense while watching?

/a live interview of Vivi with Klára Cserne in the frame of her “*Hoztam e világra*” (I brought a baby to this world) project.

“*Hoztam e világra*” is a participatory project that I started many years ago to react to the shortcomings of the Hungarian Obstetric System. The deficiencies of the system, the socially impacted mother role patterns, the taboos around motherhood are at the heart of my work with participants, whose experiences and honest stories can shape public opinion on this issue. In this experiment, I wanted to make my working method visible and to try to work in public rather than in a closed, intimate space.

The sound of a bell marked the time to return to a more discursive zone, where we opened space for sharing experiences of the library mapping. Then, a discussion on “Art in the Public Sphere” was initiated and led by Dominika and Eva, having Fanni Nánay, artistic

director of PLACCC Festival and co-founder of Szendvicsbár as a guest speaker. The open discussion aimed to map the position of an artist or cultural worker in the context of social and environmental, ecological challenges of our days, relating to our research about socially engaged art practices at times of war and the potential of art as a catalyst. At one point the conversation opened up to all the participants of the press conference, which led to the broader debate on the expectations and possibilities of art that deals with social issues.

## **Reflections, key lessons and questions, future opportunities**

### *What was the purpose of the experiment?*

Our intention was to provide space for the participants to explore some of the so-called “outcome” (meaning: artwork) of our research processes, as well as to invite them to do so using our own methodologies: somatic and sensory mapping, participatory practices.

“Artwork, at least in this phase of my research, is less an outcome, but an experiment itself. An experiential element of a targeted artistic research. I have questions, and I try to give an “answer” through the artwork, to see what happens when it meets the audience (including myself).” (Detti)

### *What kind of formats are meaningful for the presentation of different research topics and processes on a shared platform? How do we start thinking together?*

Very soon after we got to know each other's research focus, we found certain links, similar threads in the works and approaches. We started to map a so-called common ground and interest in order to see how we can relate and collaborate. Some practices and methods easily matched - like the use of somatic exercises -, leading to a proposition of joint activities. Another connection was found in the person of Fanni Nánay, who both Eva and Dominika worked with previously. Her cultural work in the public space and ethos to challenge the way people think got us started with designing the roundtable discussion “Art in the Public Sphere”.

### *What were the experiences of the live interview format?*

“I must say that the recording was just as intimate as when I work in a non-public space, thanks to Klára's background as an actress. So the performative form could be achieved, but in the absence of feedback, it is difficult to judge what effect it had on the viewers. Klára told her birth experience in Hungarian, as did the 180 other women who have participated in the project, so the focus was on presenting the form of participatory practice itself and raising the issue, rather than on her embarrassingly honest story. Although her presentation was not understandable to foreigners, we decided to do it that way, as we felt that the non-native language situation was not conducive to telling such a deep, honest, unvarnished experience, which is exactly what makes this project work.” (Vivi)

“Since I was already planning to interview Fanni, on how she works with communities, especially how she worked with refugees and how Szendvicsbar has shifted its target during 2022's refugee crisis in Budapest, it felt like a great opportunity for this conversation to happen during the press conference in order to reach more publicity and to gain more feedback and ideas with the openness of the discussion. However the

discussion turned into the direction of the general understanding of art in public space and how art can influence changes in social behavior.

Since we couldn't place the chairs in a circle it was a bit uncomfortable to talk, not knowing who to talk to, who to ask the questions: directly to Fanni, or everyone in the room. Obviously for my research I will have to do a one-on-one interview with Fanni (which I have planned to do in the first place) to get to the roots of my research question, but this open discussion can be considered as a warm up session to that." (Dominika)

#### *How to create a relevant space for participation when working with a group?*

When designing the library exploration and the tuning-in exercises, we have thought a lot about the best choice of non-frontal spatial arrangement that enables the active involvement of participants of the conference. Due to the characteristics of the library space and the number of participants, we had a limited number of possibilities. It turned out that sometimes even if traditional arrangements are not ideal, they are still the best way to go.

"During the tuning-in exercises, due to the arrangement of the chairs - it only fit in the room in rows -, Detti and I were actually taking a rather frontal position, which made me a bit tense. Normally, during such kinds of activities, I join and move around with the participants, which helps me arrive at myself and at the same time creates much more horizontal dynamics in the group.

During the discursive part of our program, though, we were trying to ensure this common position by turning our chairs around in these rows, but after all, it did not work properly. It did not ensure a connection between the speakers and the audience. Under such spatial circumstances, we probably should have left the frontal arrangement." (Eva)

"The other distributing factor was the shortness of time, as we mentioned earlier we did find a joined connection with Fanni's person, but both Eva and I are focused on a quite different element of Fanni's work, to reconcile the two we had to stay in the very superficial level of the whole theme. Even though all the participants of the conference were proficient in artistic research we could not predict how familiar they are with community art or art in public space. We only had about 40 minutes to declare our research, introduce Fanni and her work, and to open a conversation. Which was a very limiting time frame in terms of how deep we can engage with the topic." (Dominika)

#### *How to create a safe space for participation?*

The kind of activities that we started off with require a certain level of openness but also trust from the participants. How do we build this trust if we have just met three dozen strangers for the next one hour? How do we maintain smooth group dynamics?

As it happened, while within the same group one feels inspired, another can feel uncomfortable by the same simple request of following certain instructions. How do we deal with it?

"Being uncomfortable is totally normal. Maybe we ask '*Why do I feel this particular situation uncomfortable?*' - or we may not. The interesting thing for me is, how do we deal with our feelings? Expressing or sharing them is honest and can be brave.

And it can also be destructive or challenging for the facilitator and/or the group, if it comes not as sharing of an experience but an evaluation or critique.

Well, standing and speaking in front of an international, academic audience was out of my comfort zone, even though with teaching and performing, I am kind of confident lately. It took me a while to arrive into the serenity of doing, which in this case was offering somatic focuses and holding space for experience to happen. But there is something in this arrival...

Going back to the question of safe space: for me doubt, or being lost is as important in a process as engagement. In a safe space, questions do have space - not constantly, of course, but we must provide time for that, and be available. If a question rises, I process it, and try to react with all of my experiences. So sometimes I answer, sometimes just acknowledging the question itself. And some questions stay with me and later I find myself going back to them." (Detti)

"Tuning-in serves a double function. It is an invitation to turn inward and arrive at a space of introspection, a space of connection to our own body - for participants and for us who lead the process as well. Tension, doubt, curiosity, and all kinds of emotions may emerge and fluctuate in both positions. It is a possibility to connect to these feelings. Tuning-in is also a bridge to later exploration of certain environments, a practice that may nurture a new kind of relation to our wider environment, let's say, wider bodies. In order to facilitate inner processes, to activate the less used senses and exclude the normally dominant visual stimuli, I tend to ask participants to close their eyes if they feel comfortable. The past event shed light on the fragile intimacy of such a situation and raised an interesting discussion on the topic of trust, comfort and cooperation. First and foremost, I think there is not one way to join the process of arriving at your body. You hear the invitation, and you choose the best way to relate. It is okay to follow, and also fine to have individual modifications along the way. It is part of the exploration, and in my experience it greatly depends on your character, the chemistry between parties, or even your current mood and energy level. Having the eyes shut as a participant normally means no problem to me, but sometimes it just does not come naturally, I cannot relate to the practice or who is leading it, I feel insecure or too curious to "cheat." There is space for all of these until it does not interfere with and destroy the processes of others. Until it is paired with self-reflection instead of protest. While leading the process, this should be communicated more clearly. On the other hand, joining the process while leading it will undoubtedly increase authenticity and a more comfortable environment for the participants.

As a side note, spatial arrangement does have an effect on the creation of this safe space as well in my experience. It creates completely different dynamisms when we are giving instructions frontally, when we move together in space, or lay on the ground. When our gaze remains hidden, participants feel less exposed or intimidated, and it feels more organic to me as well as someone leading, facilitating the process." (Eva)

Creating a safe space and building trust is also a fundamental aspect of participatory video methods.

“In my own work process, I always feel it is important to assure the women who enter the project of my desire for equality and co-creation. As the act of childbirth usually takes place in a very hierarchical space (if it takes place in a hospital) with women giving birth at the bottom, I would like to avoid recreating these situations. I always emphasize the importance of arriving at the storytelling and finding a comfortable sitting position before the recording begins (sometimes with pillows and blankets around the body).” (Vivi)

*How to (facilitate participants) articulate experiences? Sharing or evaluation?*

We had the opportunity to discuss the experiences of the library exploration after the individual mapping process. It turned out, there is not one understanding of this activity, and one needs to frame it clearly to encourage sharing instead of evaluation. An interesting phenomenon though, the question is, what triggers the evaluative mind?

“I attribute this basically to the academic environment, in which evaluation seems to come automatically. An academic should also (re)learn just to let experiences happen and flow, with an open mind.” (Eva)

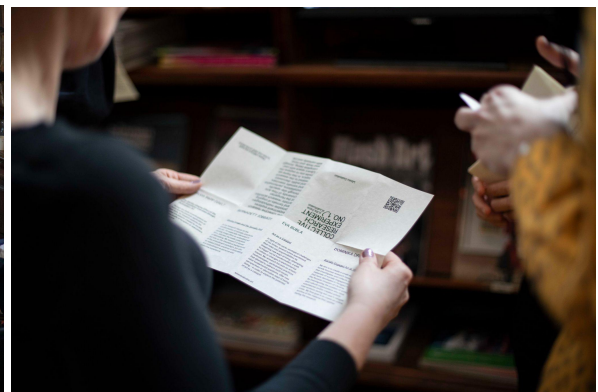
*The critical voice: constructive or judgemental?*

Towards the end of the day, during the roundtable discussion on artistic research, a question was formulated whether there is good or bad artistic research; or if we would like to have our artistic research measured that way. Shouldn't we fundamentally reframe this question and let go of the “good and bad,” “the right or wrong,” and rather explore the critical voice at its depth?

“If we look at science, an experiment can be a success or a failure, but that does not qualify the research itself, least of all the researcher. Artistic research is no exception. It is precisely the refining of failed tests and experiments that lead us to new discoveries. We do need a non-judgemental, constructive critical voice for future development. An open discussion on what has worked and what has not. Articulating why it might be so, what factors influence it, whether they are fixed or variable. Such forms of non-judgemental discussions would be very valuable in the academic and artistic community.” (Eva)

“Giving and receiving feedback is important at this point. It's also something to learn, something that can and is worth practicing. In the *giving* process, the question is: for what I give feedback and from which angle - on the format, the content, the attitude of the presenter, or I share my understanding, maybe at which point my attention dropped, etc. Not receiving any feedback or question on a proposition is feedback itself.

In the *receiving* process, we can practice how to pause the need to defend ourselves. First just listen, let the feedback arrive and settle... maybe there's something for me in it. And later, we may argue or not, but let things be heard. It can tell how people processed my work, how they understood. And though it's not the aim at all to fulfill others' needs throughout a research process, or with an art piece, it has value to know.” (Detti)



Collective Research Experiment No.1 - Eva Bublá, Bernadett Jobbágy, Szilvia Vivi Papp (HUFA Doctoral School), and Dominika Drótos (HUFA Painting Department)



Szilvia Vivi Papp: Hoztam-e világra (live interview)





Bernadett Jobbágy: Lapsúlyos || Certain solitude (video installation)  
Bernadett Jobbágy: Tactile Zone (interactive installation)  
Eva Bubla: Designated Breathing Zone (interactive installation)  
Eva Bubla: Smell Zone (interactive installation)





Dominika Drótos and Eva Bubla: "Art in the Public Sphere" - discussion with Fanni Nánay (Placcc Festival)





Roundtable discussion. Moderator: Kicsiny Balázs (head of MKE Doctoral School). Participants: Till Ansgar Baumhauer (HfBK), Andris Teikmanis (LMA), Franco Ripa di Meana, Elena Giulia Ross (ABARoma), Szabolcs KissPál (MKE), Eva Bubla (MKE DI)

Photos by Julianna Nyíri / MKE