

Making Better Places



Note on the i-Portunus event ‘Discussions towards a more inclusive, connected and sustainable mobility scheme’

“The more we collect knowledge, the better places we make” – Solomiia Halayko, Architect, Ukraine¹

i-Portunus confirms the importance of mobility in artistic and cultural work and careers. This pilot scheme of the EU, supporting the mobility of artists and cultural workers across countries participating in the Creative Europe programme, was created as a response to a clear and pressing need that artists, artistic organisations, cultural networks and others repeatedly and strongly expressed over the years. I-Portunus funds short-term mobility actions for individuals, and supports hosts to welcome international arts professionals. Currently in an experimental phase, i-Portunus is set out to pave the way for a permanent mobility scheme which would be integrated in the EU’s Creative Europe programme. The European Commission’s ambition for this new mobility scheme is to serve the artists and art workers: small-scale, flexible and tailor-made to match the needs, it will be defined and adjusted through testing and consultation with the sector and beneficiaries.

This pilot phase of i-Portunus is thus of particular importance, as it not only provides the much needed financial support for mobility, but it also allows to investigate the needs and test the support instruments. Building on the very informative ‘Operational Study about a Mobility Scheme for Artists and Culture Professionals’ by On the Move, the learnings of the pilot phase can be reflected on and integrated in the future programme. Proposed as a long-term policy instrument, and with a budget that is set to be increased, this scheme will doubtless have lasting positive effects on the sector.

Indeed, the first data coming out of this second “beta-testing” phase are remarkable: 320 artists and art workers took part in the mobility actions in this second phase of the pilot only, with almost 40% receiving some kind of direct employment as a result of their mobility; more than 90% of the beneficiaries stating that they would have not reached the same results without the mobility. With around 1 in 10 applications awarded, iPortunus clearly serves an urgent and growing need – a tip of the iceberg of a very dynamic and diverse sector that necessitates mobility support.

The online i-Portunus event ‘Discussions towards a more inclusive, connected and sustainable mobility scheme’, organised by the consortium that leads the i-Portunus scheme for individuals – Goethe-Institut, Institut français and Izolatsya – aimed at providing inspiration and food for thought on the future mobility scheme. It placed the debate firmly at the point where much of the current doubts and discussions in the transnational arts and culture sector collide: where the need for more inclusiveness and accessibility meets the challenge of necessary response to climate catastrophe.

“I want to see much more synergies” stated Commissioner Mariya Gabriel in her opening speech, and indeed this request resonated and amplified in other contributions and debates. Throughout numerous interventions,

¹ Quote taken from the i-Portunus presentation video.

a few inspiring voices called for a paradigm shift, a different way to consider and support mobility and its current challenges.

This paradigm shift calls for a different understanding of the role of mobility, in particular in relation to the struggle for social change. Beyond the indisputable positive impact on the lives and careers of artists and cultural workers, the mobility scheme has to contribute to a broader, systemic change towards fairer practices in the sector and more just relations in society – in particular to avoid reproducing excluding and extractive practices, as insisted on by Fariba Mosleh of studioOne.

The key elements discussed here, inclusiveness, accessibility and ecological justice, are deeply interconnected and further dependent on equity, social justice and other social challenges. More inclusiveness, more accessibility, more ecology are all needed, but for a mobility scheme to be impactful, these values have to be infused and aligned with other key social challenges of today.

To achieve change, all these elements need to be considered together and dealt with in a joint societal effort and taken on board at the institutional level.

In practice, a less compartmentalised and more holistic approach is key to respond to the needs of artists and cultural workers, without getting stuck in the unsolvable catch-22 of the current challenges (more mobility vs more ecology). A concentrated cross-sector effort can be the solution here. In an illustrative example, Dea Vidovic, Director of Kultura Nova, states that for artistic mobility to be accessible and eco-friendly, the most urgent step is to build infrastructure to support more ecological mobility - a responsibility that cannot be carried by the arts sector alone. The arts and culture sector has an important role to play in implementing the paradigm shift: by connecting to other sectors and developing new alliances – including with non-artistic organisations, as Chloe Fricout, Head of the Residences division of Institut français proposes.

Another element of the paradigm shift is how broadly we consider mobility. Much more than only travel, mobility is a part of a long-term transformative practice which ultimately has a positive impact on lives and careers. Beyond the actual travel, it is a process where capacity building and contextualization play crucial, although understated roles. According to Marie Le Sourd, Secretary General of On the Move, it is necessary to focus on the needs of the artists and cultural workers and the potential impact of mobility on their lives. This means to be aware of and take into consideration the specific context, situation and working conditions of the artist. Not all artists are able to experience mobility in the same way. In some places, mobility is not a choice - artists literally depend on it to be able to work and evolve in their practice; likewise, slow mobility might be impossible for cultural workers with caring responsibilities; ecological mobility is often accessible only to artists living in places with developed infrastructure and suitable geographic position. For a mobility scheme to be truly meaningful, it has to respond to the needs (including financial ones) of artists and be as close to their context and specific situation as possible.

Faced with such diversity and with discrepancies and imbalances that are so deep, a mobility scheme cannot propose a one-stop-shop solution for all as Barbara Gessler, Head of Unit of Creative Europe, in the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) of the European Commission, pointed out in her closing comments.

A solution could be found in more contextualization, an approach that takes more into account the administrative, legislative and structural specificities of the local context and pays attention to local needs. A step in this direction would be to focus more on the dissemination of funding opportunities at the local level, (for example, through the active collaboration of the Creative Europe Desks), including having information available in more languages.

To improve the bottom-up, simple and accessible scheme that Tamas Szücs, Director of Directorate D of DG EAC was calling for, further experience will be key. Artists and arts organisations, such as Odette Brady's CeldelNord already work on alternative models and tools, including digital ones. The Covid-19 crisis has led to a massive experimentation on an unprecedented scale in regard to the use of digital tools, and learnings from this are valuable and inspiring. However, a lot of the testing and experimentation is led by individuals and grassroots organisations, whose outreach and impact are limited. Experimentation is much needed on the institutional level as well. The Covid-19 crisis has shown that institutions – including funding structures – can be flexible and adapt swiftly to quickly respond to the needs of artists and cultural workers in a crisis situation; there is much to learn and build on these processes. Institutions can be the driving force of the paradigm shift, by imagining, testing and implementing tools that do not reproduce the same exclusions and reinforce the same disbalances.

Finally, another notable point of reflection, mentioned by Johannes Ebert, Secretary General of the Goethe-Institut, is opening and extending the outreach of the programme to artists and cultural workers from other countries. The positive impact of mobility is not only on artists and cultural workers that are mobile, but also on local audiences, citizens and communities. Artists carry a story, a particular vision that translates their understanding of the world; these multiple stories help us, as citizens, construct our common imagination, and a common agreement on the kind of society we are building. In this way, artists contribute to essential democratic processes. Extending the mobility programme to a broader diversity of artists, coming from other regions and countries, would further diversify the stories we access. It would better equip our societies and our sector for future positive evolutions. To put it in the words of one of the beneficiaries of i-Portunus (presented in a short video during the event): “You learn and grow by surrounding yourself with things you don't know, outside of your comfort zone”².

By all means, i-Portunus is a necessary and useful programme. Most importantly, as stated on many occasions during the event by partners and beneficiaries alike, it works: it is flexible, simple, and it is demand-led and based on the needs of artists and cultural workers. The commitment of the European Commission to further extend it, boost it with additional funding and ensure its future by permanently including it in the Creative Europe programme is a very positive development.

A more holistic approach to mobility, careful contextualization and further experimentation of tools would strengthen and broaden its scope and make it an essential element in helping artists ‘make better places’.

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² Helen Amble Skuse, musician, United Kingdom.