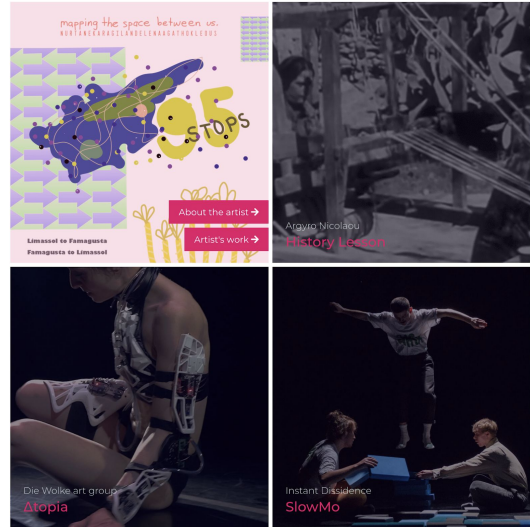


## “Thinking Partners” at the Buffer Fringe in Cyprus/A Collaboration with IMPACT (Imagining Platform for Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation)

by Germaine Ingram

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A Mediterranean festival for socially engaged artists in a place of contested landscape, and money freed up by cancellations caused by the global health crisis, together became the impetus for the “Thinking Partners” program, a joint initiative of IMPACT (Imagining Platform for Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation) and the Cyprus Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festival. This idea for providing advice and mentoring for artists creating new work about the many faces of “displacement” is generating enthusiasm and building relationships across continents, and represents a small experiment that could become a replicable model for IMPACT as it endeavors to provide tangible support for local actors in the arts, culture and conflict transformation field/ecosystem. Here’s how the “Thinking Partners” program came about.



By mid-March 2020, the reality and potential enormity of a COVID-19 pandemic was riveting attention around the globe. In many places, including the United States and other so-called more-developed countries, the emerging public health crisis compounded a pre-existing pile-up of social, health, climatic, and financial crises, and made ever more visible and threatening the disparities that bear down perpetually on marginalized, isolated and endangered populations. IMPACT, like concerned organizations world-wide, began to search for ways to respond - ways that were more than lip-service, and yet within their capacity. For IMPACT, as with many organizations, a key question became how a response might offer more than a modicum of relief to individuals and organizations thrown back on their heels by new health risks and rapid closures of businesses, services, public spaces, and borders. How might IMPACT help to open the way for forward-looking adaptation and visioning in these unmoored circumstances? An answer was at-hand and in plain sight.

At-hand was a modest pool of funds that IMPACT had allocated to travel expenses for attending international conferences and festivals that were canceled due to COVID. With approval of the donor (Porticus Community Art Lab), the funds could be reallocated. In plain sight was the Cyprus Buffer Fringe Festival, an annual curated festival of performances and exhibitions by international and Cyprus-based artists focused in and near the “buffer zone” maintained by the United Nations between territory inhabited principally by Greek Cypriots (in the south) and

territory populated by Turkish Cypriots and Turkish settlers (in the north). The 2020 Buffer Fringe has an overarching theme of “displacement” - a topic that has assumed even greater resonance as borders have closed, jobs have evaporated, families are separated by sickness and quarantine, and normal life has been disrupted on a massive scale.

During this past March and April, Buffer Fringe Artistic and Executive Director Ellada Evangelou and her team, and a small IMPACT contingent, brainstormed about how IMPACT could help the Buffer Fringe expand the experience for their artists and audiences, and how IMPACT could assist in a way that would fulfill its mission of advancing the arts, culture and conflict transformation (*ACCT*) field/ecosystem. From these intercontinental exchanges, the Buffer Fringe’s “Thinking Partners” program emerged.

The Thinking Partners program matches people from diverse locations and areas of expertise with the artists and artist teams who are creating new work for the Buffer Fringe. A Thinking Partner (TP) is charged with serving in an advisory role to a single artist or artist group, providing knowledge and support that responds to the particular creative ideas the artist is developing. The TPs work in close (primarily virtual) contact with the artists over a span of two or more months to generate critical discussions around the artistic practice itself and the *ACCT* field/ecosystem in general. TPs were recruited through the Buffer Fringe’s local artist and cultural networks and through IMPACT’s global connections to arts practitioners, scholars and culture workers involved in the *ACCT* field. As a consequence, the TPs are an international array, hailing from Cyprus as well as Argentina, Serbia, Holland, and other locales.

The program aims to render benefits in multiple directions:

~ that artists will be stimulated and informed by their engagement with an outside well-wisher and critical friend; and that they will envision their practice in relationship to the *ACCT* field and ecosystem;

~ that TPs will be stimulated and informed by working with artists across disciplines and locales, and that they will draw satisfaction from contributing to the growth of artists whose work intersects with the *ACCT* field;

~ that the Buffer Fringe establishes a new way to invest in its artists and in the rigor of the creative process it fosters; and helps to create an artist development strategy that can be replicated in the *ACCT* field;

~ that IMPACT demonstrates its support of local arts/peace building initiatives, and, in collaboration with the Buffer Fringe, develops a model for capacity-building that can be replicated elsewhere in the *ACCT* field.

Midway through the process, both TPs and artists are expressing enthusiasm for their collaborations. For example, here are comments from the Cyprus-based 4-woman artist group *Collectiva Inanna* and their TP, Arjen Barel, a Dutch director, dramaturg and storyteller.

Collectiva Inanna: "Collaborating with Arjen has been a true delight. He has guided us with warmth and kindness through a process that is new to us, and we have been strengthened by the opportunity to consult an unbiased 'outsider' who feels very much like an 'insider'. Without critiquing or curbing our creativity, Arjen has been a lively brainstorming partner, as well as a source of information, references and technical knowledge."

Arjen Barel: "We live in strange times, with many restrictions. But with opportunities as well. I truly believe Buffer Fringe facilitates using these opportunities to the fullest with the Thinking Partners program. Who could have thought that I, a white Dutch male director and dramaturg, would be connected to four great women with different backgrounds and origins, connected to each other by an island in the Mediterranean Sea? It is so interesting to see borders being erased while coming together from our own living rooms or studios. It also raises questions about who we are, in the middle of this pandemic, but in a broader universe as well."

And here's what Calcutta, India-based dancer/choreographer/director Vikram Iyengar, a Festival artist, says about the significance of the relationship with his TP:

"Our meetings with Maria Hadjimichaal really helped us gain a context of Cyprus in the realm of the climate crisis and beyond. For those who've never visited the island, it was an extraordinary bridge to understanding many nuances about the Cypriot experience of water in different shapes and forms. It brought us in touch with both balanced and analytical information and studies as well as delightful and poignant anecdotal colour. It would have been impossible to glean the kind of personal connection, knowledge and depth that Maria so generously offered us from web-based research. It definitely gives us a much surer footing when trying to create a piece with Cypriots rooted in a Cyprus and non-Cyprus experience."

Finally, words from Serbian theater director Dijana Milosevic:

"It is my honor to be invited to be one of the Thinking Partners. I find this idea highly innovative and inspirational. It creates the space for real artistic exchange, with trust and mutual respect. The dialogue that is created between artists and myself as their Thinking Partner would benefit the work of both sides, would also push us into the unknown, and expand our limits, providing the shared sense of togetherness."

The Buffer Fringe team and IMPACT could not be more excited about how the program has evolved. Their collaboration - their commitment to being "thinking partners" to one another - has helped to ensure that, despite a global health crisis, opportunities can continue and expand for artists to speak as only art and culture can to the global challenges of conflict and dislocation. You can hear directly from Festival artists and their TPs on a podcast that the Buffer Fringe will broadcast on November 14th at 13:00 EST/18:00 CY time. Go to the [Buffer Fringe website](#) for access information and to the [Festival blog](#) for background on the artists and updates on the work-in-progress. .