

MOVING ——— IN MOVING ——— ON

#13

**TEH Startup Support
Programme 2021**

Featuring:
Eixo Residências Artísticas
Mosteiró / Vila do Conde, Portugal



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THE TRANS EUROPE HALLES (TEH) STARTUP SUPPORT PROGRAMME: WHY AND HOW?

Through an open call, launched in July 2020, Trans Europe Halles (TEH) invited initiatives from Mediterranean countries – Cyprus, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain – to apply for our Startup Support Programme.

Trans Europe Halles is a network of more than 100 cultural centres – initiated by citizens and artists who have revitalised vacant buildings for arts, culture and activism across Europe. We started our work in 1983 in Western Europe and we're now supporting emerging creative and cultural spaces in the Balkans, Eastern Partnership and Southern Mediterranean countries too.

In 2017, we launched the Startup Support Programme – offering access to all the knowledge, experience and skills we've gained in Europe over the past 37 years.

WHY NOW?

From 2017-2021, we have been running and continue to run a wide range of activities under the strapline **Factories of Imagination: Investing in Cultural Changemakers**.

This project is motivated by an urgent concern: in many European countries, non-governmental cultural centres are under-resourced and don't have the funds or the conditions in place to fully achieve their potential. This is particularly true in regions and countries where neither civil society initiatives nor critical artistic production are encouraged by public authorities – and indeed are sometimes actively discouraged.

This is the case in the Balkans, which was the focus of the first year of our Startup Support Programme, and also in Ukraine and Belarus, the focus for 2019. The situation is the same for Azerbaijan and Armenia, where we operated in 2020.

Within the EU, in the Southern part of Europe, some emerging centres also struggle to create a sustainable existence in their environment. At TEH, we noticed a lack of new member applications from these countries over the past few years. That is why we encouraged initiatives from this region to apply for this year's Startup Support Programme.



The Startup Support Programme 2021 aimed to reach out to these kinds of initiatives across **Cyprus, Italy, Malta, Portugal** and **Spain**. However, since the Covid-19 pandemic was in full swing, the process we launched was carried out completely online due to Covid-19 safety protocols and travel restrictions.

We launched an initial open call in July 2020; we chose a selection committee; we carried out online visits; we organised conference participation, online coaching, organisational workshops and written reports. As a result of this activity, we are very pleased to be able to welcome four of these initiatives into the TEH network:

- **DASTE in Bergamo, Italy**
- **E50035 Expect the Unexpected in Palazzuolo sul Senio, Italy**
- **Eixo Residências in Mosteiró / Vila do Conde, Portugal**
- **Útero in Lisbon, Portugal**

This case study will focus on **Eixo Residências Artísticas** in Mosteiró / Vila do Conde, Portugal.

EIXO RESIDÊNCIAS ARTÍSTICAS IN MOSTEIRÓ / VILA DO CONDE, PORTUGAL

A small, deserted girls' school at the edge of a village surrounded by fields and meadows in Portugal. It's an unlikely setting for a place brimming with ideas for contemporary dance residencies – both local and international, live and online, rooted in local communities and reaching out across the world. But it's actually happening here.

On our first online visit, we got a Google view walk through Mosteiró, which is traditionally known as a stop along the walking route to the town of Santiago de Compostela in the north of Spain. The town square hosts the oldest open-air market in Portugal, and the oldest pharmacy. Next to the square is the local community centre, with its well-equipped performance hall, run by JUM – the local youth association.

The community centre has an ongoing programme of dance, theatre, karate, athletics and holiday specials. At first view, everything looks peaceful. But while the older generation is rooted

in this agricultural environment, youngsters are leaving this area in droves. The village is just a few metro stops down the line to Porto – the big, bustling, culturally thriving city on the coast. Mosteiró, and its neighbouring town of Vila do Conde, could use some new artistic energy. And this is where Eixo steps in.

THE SPACE

The little old school had been standing empty for years when Isabel Costa – a dancer, choreographer and teacher, based in Porto – decided that she would like to start a dance residency here. She grew up in Mosteiró. Her mother co-founded JUM on 24 April 1974, the night before the Portuguese revolution, and Isabel herself has been teaching dance there since 2006.

She began negotiations with the municipality, which was planning to tear the building down and replace it with a new old people's home. As part of the negotiations, Eixo aims to use the school rent-free, in exchange





for involving the surrounding communities (especially children and youngsters) in workshops and festive events. Eixo hopes to prove its value in such a way that it will be granted long-term security, regardless of elections and changes of power.

It's easy to see how performers and choreographers from across the country and abroad would benefit from a short residency here. The main room has light and space. The kitchen and storage spaces have been emptied and cleaned up. Outside, a patio and a garden provide room for movement and discovery, even in times of lockdown. And visiting artists can be offered

food and a bed in private homes in the neighbourhood. Slowly but surely, throughout the pandemic, Eixo Residências Artísticas has been settling in and bringing the empty school back to life.

THE FOUNDERS

The idea started with Isabel, with support from her husband Ruben. Soon she was joined by Malena Albarracin, an Argentinian dancer and coach, who had moved to Porto only to discover that there were few spaces for free artistic expression outside of the established institutions. Together, they were accepted at the Startup Voucher programme of UPTEC at the University of Porto.

This offered them a modest initial budget and regular guidance in starting up their artistic enterprise, under the invaluable mentorship of Fátima São Simão, who joined a couple of our weekly conversations. Isabel and Malena started the new residency programme from scratch. At the same time as they were negotiating with the municipality, establishing a working relationship with JUM and the regional Circular Cultural Association, setting up an annual budget and searching for funding possibilities, they quickly succeeded in identifying and attracting open-minded dance professionals, both young and experienced, for an ongoing series of short residencies.

As the opening of Eixo coincided with the first wave of the pandemic, they were initially not able to share (or even enter) the small school. However, under these circumstances, they soon discovered something that could almost be called a new art form: collective dance exercises/performances, run by an experienced choreographer and joined by both trained and totally fresh participants (often from the local community), fully online. Playing with multiple screens, music and movements, a trans-Atlantic and pan-European dance experience emerged – sometimes with the resident artists based in the school, sometimes with everyone locked down in their living rooms. 'Dancing,'

said workshop leader Daniel Pinheiro, 'with technology.'

THE RESIDENCIES

Why has Eixo specifically chosen artist residencies? The region, especially Porto, boasts a large number of art institutions and festivals, but Isabel felt that there was something missing, especially in small towns like Mosteiro. 'I was the only artist the community knew,' she said. 'We wanted to take away the idea that art is something distant and abstract.'

Regular contact with artists, the influx of new ideas – that is what Eixo could provide. Malena added a slightly more activist-oriented and feminist dimension. 'I grew up with the idea that performance is a kind of resistance,' said Malena. 'To make the world a bit more democratic, to challenge the structures of power.'

Residencies offer time and space, a rare commodity in our capitalist society. And Eixo aimed to provide access, especially to artists outside of the elite; artists who show empathy with people and enjoy connecting, who would be willing to take part in the daily life of the community and grow artistic projects out of that experience.

Through open calls and an active presence on social media (including a takeover of TEH's Instagram feed), Eixo quickly managed to attract proposals and requests from a wide range of upcoming and experienced dancers and choreographers. Over the past year, a number of short

residencies materialised, partly online, but also in the old school, in the garden and in the town.

The connection with JUM and its cultural centre also helped. A modest but lively, adventurous reputation was in the making. All of this was based on the principle that Eixo would never ask artists to pay for their residencies. When they had funding, they could share some of their budget with the local participants, but the residencies themselves should remain freely accessible.

THE ORGANISATION

Helped by the Startup Voucher programme of the UPTEC, Isabel and Malena were able to devote their time to Eixo and develop the residency programme, supported by designer Louise, photographer Natacha and producer Sara. Trust and connections in Mosteiro and beyond were being built.

But then the partnership split. Isabel gave birth to a little boy. Malena travelled to Buenos Aires, her hometown. After that break, they weren't able to continue their collaboration. Simmering differences in artistic ambitions and personalities surfaced. To us as mentors, from a distance, it was clear that these differences were beyond reconciliation. We had open conversations and remained in touch with both, but the final result was that Malena went back to her practice as an independent dancer and teacher, while Isabel is now fully in charge of Eixo and is responsible for its future.

This summer, she formalised it as a cultural association, which the municipality supports with an initial budget and offers the opportunity of applying for an annual grant of €10,000. The focus will be mainly to connect the artists in residence – who can still be from close and far away – very clearly and actively with the people of Mosteiro and Vila do Conde. Gardening together and doing morning exercises with the people living around the centre has become a natural first step towards the artistic practice, all the time building Eixo's reputation as a well-respected and accessible residency with a sustainable future.

THE CHALLENGES

Eixo has managed to prove its potential right through the pandemic so far. Its relationships within the Mosteiro / Vila do Conde municipality and the wider region have been strengthened. There are multiple requests for residencies from artists across the country and beyond. Now, Isabel faces three main challenges:

- **The team needs to be rebuilt. The departure of Malena leaves some gaps. The arrival of producer and fundraiser Sara is important. To facilitate the residencies – technically, logistically, socially and artistically – young local professionals like Ines from JUM will be welcome. Planning multiple residencies each year, with a steady rhythm, requires a solid and ongoing team effort.**
- **To sustain the team and the residencies, Eixo will now have to generate steady sources of**

income, after the Startup Voucher from UPTEC made the initial phase possible. Isabel has little experience in fundraising, but after she set up her first annual budget (which we as mentors discussed with her, identifying the questions it highlights about the course and scale Eixo will choose), she now has targets for the funds Eixo needs to raise. Regional subsidies are modest; national ones are hard to achieve. We discussed the possibilities of applying to European (residency) programmes. And there will be attempts to attract donorships from/ collaborations with (agricultural) business in the region, blending social and artistic aims for the good of the community.

• **In the meantime, the school building needs to be secured for the coming years, to justify investments in the interior and equipment. Talks with the municipality are ongoing. Alternative locations are also being discussed. If Eixo wants to fulfill its potential, it needs a stable home base.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

After six months of weekly Zoom talks with Ada Arduini and Chris Keulemans, mentors of this year's Startup Support Programme, TEH provided a three-day workshop on a topic of Isabel's choice, with an expert she admires for his earlier work in similar circumstances:

João Pedro Vaz. Questions included how did he manage to build social and artistic work in five rural areas and involve the local communities through his project with Comédias do Minho? His report on the valuable workshop is here.

Through our conversations, we collected some recommendations for Eixo's next phase:

Aim for a 5-year contract for the use of the school building with the municipality, including a yearly evaluation with clear criteria (social, artistic, public and financial results for the community), offering to pay rent after the first year. Including the clause that Eixo will be offered an alternative venue, in case the school is used for a different purpose.

Set up a monthly roundtable with people from JUM and the municipality, to discuss the development of Eixo and related activities, in order to create a sense of co-responsibility.

Explore the possibility of offering paid services, like exercises in team building, to industries and businesses in and around Mosteiro.

Explore the possibilities of tapping into the new funding schemes for circular economy initiatives in the region.

Reach out to other centres in the TEH network, to gain from their experience and explore the potential for future collaborations. Connections were made with l'Asilo (Napoli), Ateliersi (Bologna), Maltfabrikken (Ebeltoft) and Studio Alta (Prague).



Two international experts worked closely with the TEH staff on the Startup Support Programme 2020:

ADA ARDUINI volunteer and former director of INTERZONA in Verona, Italy – a cultural initiative that, for the past 30+ years, has been focusing on contemporary music and arts that were ground-breaking for this area.

CHRIS KEULEMANS a travelling writer and moderator – the founder and artistic director of Tolhuistuin cultural centre in Amsterdam. Chris is also the author of this report.

The recent TEH publication 'Smart and Fearless. Guidelines for emerging arts centres in Eastern, Southeastern and Southern Europe', which describes discoveries made and lessons learned during the Startup Support Programme 2018-2021, can be found [HERE](#).

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