

'DANCE AS ICH' – WORKSHOP 1, MECHELEN

Introduction

From January 30 until February 1st 2023, the [Dance – ICH project](#) had its first of four workshops in the historic city centre of Mechelen, Belgium. Hosted by partner organisation **CEMPER** (Centre for Music and Performing Arts Heritage in Flanders, Belgium), the programme consisted of **presentations, workshops**, and a **Boombal** folk dance night. This is the report of the workshop days, which took place at the Predikheren public library and the Cultural Centre of Mechelen.

Day 1: Monday 30 January 2023

Words of welcome

Mariet Calsius (director of CEMPER) welcomed the partners and introduced the project's aim to develop new ways for museums to integrate dancing as intangible cultural heritage (henceforth: ICH). Subsequently, **Tone Erlie Myrvold** ([Norwegian Centre for Traditional Music and Dance](#)) challenged the attendants to consider their privilege to engage with this goal, given their backgrounds as museum and heritage workers, researchers and, most importantly, dance practitioners. As project instigator, she reminded the attending partners, presenters and audience members – a largely gender-equal crowd of men and women – of their respective knowledges across the field in the participating countries: Norway, Belgium, Slovenia, Romania, Greece and Hungary. Finally, she called for more embodied dance meetings rooted in participation, diversity and sustainability.



Morning session: the search for a common terminology

The first session revolved the notion of ICH and its origin in the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The session both introduced and problematized common terminology of ICH and presented the concept in relation to dance.

Jorijn Neyrinck, coordinator of [Workplace Intangible Heritage](#), first presented one of two introductions to safeguarding living heritage, “Made by People, Empowered by UNESCO”, which provided input for a shared working terminology. Tracing governance shifts since the 1990s, she noted the drive towards an embodied understanding of heritage considering sustainability, diversity and participation. These shifts were instrumental to

defining ICH in the 2003 Convention and its basic texts. Jorijn underlined the 2003 Convention's unicity because of its holistic and agenda-oriented, operational nature. Instead of focusing on direct, one-way transmission, it conceptualises the safeguarding and transmission of ICH in the broadest and most participative sense possible, in reciprocal interaction with relevant communities, groups and individuals. On the end of heritage organisations, this requires constant efforts to broker and to have all involved parties consider what the ICH means for them and those they are working with – serious considerations for all present. Jorijn also addressed challenges of the 2003 Convention as being expert-only by noting its primary aim to create consciousness of ICH without positioning UNESCO as the prime mover. She also acknowledged the informal learning and practicing processes that are inherently part of safeguarding ICH.

Next was **Marc Jacobs**, [professor Critical Heritage Studies at the University of Antwerp](#). Continuing our introduction to safeguarding living heritage, his presentation was titled "Made by UNESCO, appropriated by CGIs", and focused on the inextricable connection between ICH and safeguarding by practitioners first and foremost. Building on the work of Diana Taylor about archived and repertoire heritage, he presented a third approach where continuously evolving heritage is 'saved as such', e.g. safeguarded. He coined the 2003 Convention as the introduction of tailorable guidelines for this reality on a global scale, and addressed the importance of close cooperation with heritage communities or, preferably, "communities, groups and, if relevant, individuals", for which he proposed the acronym 'CGIs'. These umbrella terms better address the widespread constellations, meanings and transformations of ICH and its practitioners. The autonomy of CGIs is central to the 2003 Convention, said Jacobs, although the balancing act between this relative autonomy and critical interventions is tough, such as over [racist depictions in the Duchesse of Ath](#). Coming back to Taylor's argument, he noted the importance of repeated mediation efforts by heritage workers based on the 2003 Convention's ethical principles, because ICH does not stop evolving, especially given the rapid onset of digitalisation.



Egil Bakka of the [Norwegian University of Science and Technology](#) concluded the morning session with his presentation "Between derailment and linearisation: problems in the safeguarding of dance". This framed specific safeguarding challenges in the appropriate context. Through a folk tale of so-called Goatdancers slowly displaced from their own practice, he illustrated various potential issues with ICH safeguarding, such as derailment and linearisation. In the former case, the practice is decontextualised by so-called welldoers whose own take on the dance outplaces original performers. In the latter,

a singular coinage of the dance, such as through registration, effectively prohibits naturally occurring, local variations. Each in their respective position, he warned, should bracket their own value judgement and accept the multi-linear forms that practitioners of dance as ICH can choose from. This understanding of dance challenges the 2003 Convention, he admits, but only in that way, sovereignty over the ICH stays with its actual CGIs. A singular approach or unanimous terminology, he added, is impossible when dealing with ICH – winning the agreement of Jorijn and Marc as well.



Afternoon session: supporting dance in Flanders – cultural brokers and facilitators

After lunch, representatives of five organisations that support dance in Flanders and Brussels, presented themselves. Even if not heritage-oriented, they all coin participatory safeguarding practices.

Workshop co-organiser **Anaïs Verhulst** introduced [CEMPER](#), where she supervises the ICH department. CEMPER is one of seven heritage-facilitating, theme-based organisations in the Flanders region, working to advise, support and guide CGIs on their (in)tangible heritage relating to music and performing arts. Among other strategies, CEMPER participates in bottom-up registrations of ICH to inventorise and safeguard, and supports applications for craftsmanship bursaries, such as the creation of hurdy-gurdies and manipulation of hand puppets. CEMPER also cooperates with other ICH-related initiatives, including the publication of a children songs book that embraces the ethnically and lingually diverse heritage of Flanders' and the Netherlands' population. CEMPER also engages and/or assists in advisory programs for documenting dance costumes and practices - priming CGIs to take the reins.



Next, **Leen Devyver** introduced [Danspunt](#), which supports amateur dancing in Flanders. It aims to bring amateur and professional practitioners closer together through artistic stimulation, social connections, educational opportunities and informational support, such as on financing. Among these functions, Leen organises heritage care initiatives that focus on traditional Flemish dances in collaboration with the heritage sector and academia. Danspunt also stimulates sector connectivity at its annual Rendez-Vous and supports bottom-up documentation in the future Dansbank. This database will afford dancers to upload a range of information, like specific steps, group composition, role distribution, and other relevant information for other dancers. By videotaping each dance, Danspunt wants to account for and safeguard the multi-track reality of traditional dances (avoiding what Egil described as linearisation). But its most important aim of the Dansbank, Leen concluded, is to encourage dancing.

Gert Laekeman presented the [Institute for Flemish Folk Arts](#) (IVV for short). This organisation archives, promotes and publishes information on the Flemish folk arts, including dancing, flag-waving (derived from military flag manoeuvres) and costumes, which are occasionally recreated for dance purposes. Concerning dance, they have currently amassed around 260 historical and new dances for safeguarding. Specifically, the main purpose of the IVV is to promote the doing of these arts. In this work, Gert noted, the IVV sees generational differences arise, for example among younger participants who only wear the costumes together – favouring group cohesion over displaying local identity. Yet financial support and the attraction of new dancers remain challenging.



Lieven Claeys, co-organiser of the [Boombal event series](#), introduced the partners to their concept of dancing to folk music in a low-barrier manner, without claims to historical accuracy. Rather, Boombal encourages familiarisation with folk music and movements, aiming to mainstream folk. This liberal approach to folk dance and music has led to criticism of tradition-oriented dance groups that see Boombal's approach "as a threat to their heritage of the dance and music", Lieven admitted. Nevertheless, it has increased the appreciation of folk among various audiences, ranging from primary school children to companies and even members of parliament. In response to whether Boombal comprises a subculture, Lieven attested that Boombal actually avoids being subcultural by resisting exclusionary practices, such as the use of special costumes. Rather, they rely on the spontaneous and dynamic partnerships, experiments and performances that are born on the dancefloor.

Finally, **Marie Devlieger** of [Muziekpublique](#) took the stage. This Brussels-based NGO wants to make music meet the audience in the open – which illustrates their name's etymology. Marie explained that to meet this goal, it has three areas of activity: concert promotion, music and dance education, and label work. Dance as ICH is especially present, for which Marie works as a coordinator. By attracting teachers from across the world, Muziekpublique's dance classes do not subscribe to a specific teaching method, but rather rely on the individual experiences and knowledges of its teachers. Such an informal approach, which also supports jam sessions, exchanges and such, helps to build bridges between Muziekpublique's performers and their various audiences.



Day 2: Tuesday 31 January 2023

Morning sessions: inspiring examples of dance in museums

On the second day, several partners shared their inspirational experiences with incorporating dance as living heritage in their museum spaces. They discussed actions taken, lessons learned, and efforts aimed at sustainability and reciprocity.

Tone Fegran & Helle Singsaas of the [Ringve Music Museum](#) delivered the first presentation. As Norway's national music and musical instruments museums, their aim is to stimulate musical encounters between the past, present and future of the country. Dance, democratic participation and educational programs for all ages, developed simultaneously to the exhibitions, are a major part of this – for how to speak of dance without showing it? To avoid agenda-setting, Ringve does not work with experts, but involves professional dancers to stimulate playful and creative participation, even by their personnel. Throughout their presentation, Tone and Helle highlighted several examples from a variety of music genres exhibited at Ringve, where dancing was made a literal part of the exhibition. Whether summer schools, social programs for people with dementia or [traditional folk dances](#) (which Tone Erlien Myrvold later elaborated on), the museum acted as a facilitator for these events and activities. This sometimes meant that dance CGIs would literally occupy the museum hallways, giving them full ownership over the display and putting them in direct contact with the audience.



The next speaker was **Tone Erlien Myrvold** of the Norwegian Centre for Traditional Music and Dance, and a regular partner of Ringve. Her presentation revolved around specific dancing museum methods in Norway, providing a theoretical background to practical examples. Building on relational aesthetics and approaches to participatory art and museums, she presented the museum as a people-centred, action-oriented place that can entice visitors to co-create through personal interest in what they see. Such autonomous interactions can be stimulated through materials, curated events like panels and parties, pedagogical programs (including dance activities!), and space facilitation, echoing the notion of the museum as a facilitator rather than an instigator. Variety is the spice of life, and so Tone concluded that it is important that museums extend invitations to all kinds of dance and other artistic performances, rather than make their own selection.



Finally, **Rebeka Kunej** of the [Institute of Ethnomusicology](#) at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, took the stage. She presented the case study of Kolo dances and Easter games in Metlika, Slovenia, which were declared in ICH of National Importance in 2018. Throughout its history, she recognised multiple approaches to the practice, ranging from historicisation in the early 20th century to an active staging in cultural institutions during the Cold War. This treatment as a presumably authentic 'living museum' proved instrumental for its survival when USSR rule cracked down on local cultural rituals. Namely, the dance's embodied meanings could truly survive during rehearsals. In the early 2000s, practitioners organised themselves to sustain Kolo dance in Metlika, supported by the 2003 Convention and national ICH policies. And while the 'living museum' approach to ICH is nowadays regarded as constructed in favour of a more creative, stage-interpretive approach, its importance cannot be understated, said Rebeka. More and more, community spirit and creativity generate dynamic variations in Metlika Kolo dance that ensure new transmissions, like [promotional videos made with school children](#) or [during](#)

times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Using that example, Rebeka stressed the importance of CGIs to take the creative reins to safeguard their dance practices, and to use the 2003 Convention's outlines as a means of describing these ever-developing variations.

The speakers and audiences then engaged in a general discussion. One shared conclusion was that **broadly oriented exhibitions accommodate both formal and informal interactions**, such as dancing and presentation, or debate and conversation. A co-creative network helps to structure more formal elements, such as in one of Ringve's past exhibitions on folk music and nationalism. A recurring question, then, was **whether 'living heritage' implies that the practice is still actively practiced, or maybe just re-enacted from archival materials**. Answers differed, but it was agreed that new dances are born while traditional ones continue to be kept. Their performances co-exist and even mingle or inspire each other. On that note, re-enacted dances would constitute a new form of ICH. Finally, local CGIs in the audience discussed their **willingness to dance in a museum**. While they would happily accept upon invitation, they unanimously emphasised sustainability; it could not be a one-off thing. To some, presentation also mattered greatly, as many groups distinguish stage performances (occasionally tied to local identity) and practice. Playing it in a museum would therefore require proper explanation, for example of its decontextualisation – illustrating the combination of formal and informal interaction. With that, the morning session concluded that ownership of dance in the museum is with the CGIs and that its display must be assessed case-by-case.



Over lunch, Hanne Kinne of Frisse Folk, aided by CEMPER's Didier Goossens, displayed various flag-waving movements, as introduced by Gert Laekemans of IVV in Monday's afternoon session.



Afternoon sessions:

Roundtable discussion: heritage communities, dancing and museums

Following lunch, independent heritage expert **Jana Kerremans** hosted a panel to reflect on challenges and opportunities for (and cooperations on) safeguarding dance as ICH in the museum, according to CGIs themselves. Her panellists were **Theo Smet** of [folk dance group Canteclaer](#) and the [VVKB](#) (umbrella organisation for all folk dance groups performing traditional Flemish dances); **Desislava Krsteva**, a [Bulgarian Horo dancer and cultural worker in Brussels](#); and **Koen Dhondt and Anita Iliens** of [Frisse Folk](#), which aims to introduce and meet people with different skill levels to folk dance.

Three challenges stood out: **the need for space, for financial support and for people**. Can these resolve each other? Desislava offered the example of Bulgarian museums opening their spaces for 'living exhibitions' like dance, which drew in large crowds. This enthused panellists, because it generates the necessary visibility for folk dance groups to attract new members, for example from surrounding communities in lively cities like Brussels. Despite practical (space, materials), cultural (high hobbies offer, folk's negative image) and technical challenges (ticket sales, skill level differences), the development of such networks are key, asserted Theo and Koen.

Building on Tone Erlien Myrvold's earlier remarks, Jana pointed out the role of museum workers and how they could work with CGIs to facilitate the safeguarding of their dance practices. This presents a **marked turn in museum work, focusing on engagement** instead of collections and display. According to Desislava, however, the active and embodied presence of dance as ICH can also entail endangered practices, safeguarding them and attracting larger audiences. This did raise two questions. First, concerning derailment, Theo responded that a shared version with variation is always the VVKB's aim, while Jana explained changes naturally occur in living heritage. Only if variations outpace the original, panellists agreed, would this pose a problem. Second, dancers need to be guaranteed fair pay for their invested time in the museum exhibit.

But **is the museum the right place** for that? Koen and Anita emphasised the importance of informal encounters, for example at the bar for post-rehearsal drinks. Can a museum offer that? Extensive renovations or gentrification, let alone opening hours and utilisation restrictions, raise the bar for dance CGIs looking for space – which not every museum has. And while municipalities often support closer cooperation, they too have little room to manoeuvre, Anita recounted from experience. Panellists therefore called on heritage organisations to act as mediators and networkers and to organise efforts to accommodate these spaces – creating a house for dance with many rooms.



Keynote: Understanding Flamenco: between meaningful heritage & economic need
Last to present was keynote speaker **Kurt Grötsch** (via MS Teams), director of the [Museum of Flamenco Dance in Sevilla, Spain](#). His presentation revolved around the dance's origin, its social and emotional roots, and challenges of safeguarding it as ICH. This became especially relevant after UNESCO inscribed flamenco on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010. When it comes to understanding flamenco, he defined it as consisting of three pillars, namely the guitar, song and dance. The former two make up around 70 basic rhythms, only 12 of which can be danced to. Flamenco dance, therefore, cannot exist without its music. Its roots lie in various cultural experiences that tie into historical experiences of migration, religious persecution and communality, shaping a collective cultural memory that flamenco continues to draw on. This traceable emotional core – called *duende* – and the resulting social, interpersonal energy, are crucial to the flamenco experience – and to the museum. Combining tangible items like costumes and instruments with intangible aspects of flamenco made apprehensible – through videographing and expression engineering – the museum engages in educational, therapeutical and facilitating activities – without assuming ownership over flamenco, as its Andalusian hotbed is just one of many sites. Because of its globalisation, flamenco also continuously evolves, for example by crossing over into mainstream pop. The attention to emotion garnered the audience's attention and its musealisation could be considered an important consideration for safeguarding dance as ICH in museums.



Evening – tapas reception at CEMPER HQ

After a day of insightful presentations and fruitful discussion spearheaded by local dance communities, groups and individuals, CEMPER invited all attendants for a tapas reception in their office, at the foot of Mechelen's historic Sint-Rombouts bell tower. This provided an excellent opportunity to further debate and process the topics of the day.



Day 3: Wednesday 1 February 2023

Morning session:

The ICH & Museums Project – set up and results of a European cooperation on safeguarding ICH in/with museums

Kia Tsakiridis, administrative manager at the Workplace Intangible Heritage and coordinator of the [Creative Europe project Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums \(2017-2020\)](#), led the third and final day. First, she introduced the project's set-up, resulting publications and methodological toolkit. At its core, it explored a “variety of approaches, interactions and practices on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage together with museums”, particularly on how museums can interact with practitioners of ICH. Its goal was to stimulate the development of innovative experiences for co-operative ICH safeguarding in the museum, like the [Tambú exhibition in The Hague's Museon in 2019](#).

In the context of historical European museal practices – acquisition, research, interpretation and safeguarding for the purpose of general audience-oriented exhibitions – the project employed critical lenses such as diversity, sustainability and participation. By understanding these as goals instead of solutions, a **3rd space or intersection approach** was developed where museums and CGIs co-create participatory environments. Here, ICH can be defined, exhibited and demonstrated in ethical and cooperative ways that require simultaneous exchanges of expertise. Among other publications, this led to a **toolkit** consisting of guides, best practice examples, literature on threats and ethics, gamified tools, video testimonials. Notably, this toolkit is not oriented at any type of ICH, but can be used by museums, CGIs, heritage organisations, audience members and policymakers alike.



Afternoon sessions:

In the afternoon, Kia and her colleague **Shana van Hauwermeiren** put the attendants to work in six groups. Using two toolkit workshops, they engaged in two exercises relating to the exhibition of dance as ICH in a museum.

Exercise 1: roleplay on safeguarding dance as ICH in a museum context

The first workshop invited everyone to **assume roles very different to their own**. Roleplaying these respective backstories, they would then provide input for a dance exhibition in a museum. Afterwards, everyone was challenged to examine their actual positions in a new light. Across the groups, a number of fascinating results came forward.

For example, **those who practice dance**, agreed that it is difficult to transmit what is deeply felt and therefore easier danced than done. When asked what they would want to share with the audience, joy was often the response. **Those roleplaying as audience members** frequently emphasised transparency and clear instructions, as they might hesitate to take the literal first step, being more used to a performance instead. Participatory activities might therefore work better than educational programs. At the same time, practitioners must also consider their own needs: for example, will simplifying the dance to make it more accessible, not derail the practice as a whole? Instead, it was suggested to teach only a few, unchanged steps of the dance and encourage participation in that way. On that note, many agreed that traditions should be duly minded throughout the entire exhibition.

For museum workers (ranging from director, communication specialist to security guard), different challenges lie ahead: where, when and how will a dance exhibition be staged? How is it communicated? And how to sustain the museum's own mission while fostering dance practices? The recurring notion of invitations and facilitation often came up in discussions: museum workers should ensure that practical concerns are met in designing the exhibition, and it is connected to existing policies, collections and audiences. A popular role was the security guard, who embodies safety regulations, property use and authority – which might discourage participation – yet who might also aspire to dance! Inversely, museums might function as an advisor to local projects, facilitating expertise and methods instead of literal space. Participating **researchers and heritage organisations** nuanced communications about ICH and helped to contextualise and centralise the CGIs' interests. Their respective networks could also raise awareness among policymakers, cultural industries and different media.

In conclusion, many accentuated a shared vision with an evolving dialogue on how and what version(s) of dance as ICH to present. One participant pointed out that this requires constant re-evaluation to involve and engage all parties. Errors might be made, provided these are communicated transparently. But most concurred that it is worse to not do anything at all. Echoing Egil, museum workers should bracket their value judgements and leave the narrative of dance exhibitions to its practitioners.

Exercise 2: ideal (or consensus) dance exhibition in museum

The second workshop moved from answering practical concerns to **designing an ideal dance exhibition**, based on six questions about topics like the museum audience, the relationship with practitioners and their (historic) portrayal, the use of tangible items, and the relevance of broader collaboration. The following concrete suggestions emerged.

Many concurred that the **audience** should take home something to be passed on: an embodied understanding of the dance. Therefore, an ideal exhibition has clear expectations of how the audience can participate in a dance, including people with disabilities. Hence, the **feeling and value of dance** is primary. This invitation should be prepared with and extended by the practitioners.

While conversations could encourage the transmission of dance values, the **exhibition's primary concern** should be the dance itself. However, a completely decontextualised display cannot be the point. The museum should therefore draw on its amassed expertise to explore heterogeneous histories of the practice, **contextualise** its contemporary use and critically assess variations – as these constantly evolve under

socio-economic impulses. Practically speaking, an open-air museum could display this historical context in a lived, participatory way.

Finally, the **preparation of such a collaborative exhibition** begins in the world of dance itself. An **external project manager** can help to gauge and manage different stakes, opinions, meanings and expectations. For example, will the museum's primary concern be critical reflection of historical developments or contemporary safeguarding of dance ICH? In short, the 'why' must be defined together with the participating CGIs before the 'who, what, how'. A project manager can also alleviate administrative responsibilities for the museum and CGIs. Another approach would be to **let practitioners author the exhibit contents** and to have museum workers curate and prepare this information for display. In this way, the practitioners' expertise is at the heart of both the practical and informational exhibition.



Conclusion and Boombal

After the workshops concluded, Mariet Calsius and Tone Erlien Myrvold explicitly thanked the attendants for their critical questions and the active participation in the discussions and workshops. That evening, the workshop days culminated with a pleasant Boombal.

