

Approaches to Dance from the Ukrainian Diaspora Across Europe (Dec 2023 - Nov 2025)

In 2023, Aerowaves (IE), together with Arte Sella (IT), la briqueterie CDCN (FR) and Tanec Praha (CZ), began to explore how female dance artists from Ukraine were informing approaches to welcoming and engaging refugees through dance, and how this was contributing to the development of inclusive and cohesive practices across Europe.

As a consequence Moving Borders, a cooperation project co-funded by the European Union was conceived, and since that time the partners have organised international workshops, meetings (live and online) and dissemination events, as well as commissioning this publication.

In order to provide tools for dance and cultural organisations to handle the arrival of forcibly displaced artists and civilians, Moving Borders brought together a team composed of three female dance artists from Ukraine with a team of researchers.

The Ukrainian dance artists are: Rita Lira (based in Paris, France), Anna Kushnirenko (based in Bassano del Grappa, Italy) and Yana Reutova (based in Prague, Czech Republic). The research team are: Karina Buckley (based in Dublin, Ireland), Luisella Carnelli (based in Torino, Italy) and Monica Gillette (based in Freiburg, Germany).

The publication, designed by Sara Lando, pivots around three viewpoints from dramaturg Monica Gillette, researcher Luisella Carnelli and dance writer Karina Buckley. Their contributions offer different perspectives on what was discovered, informed by their own professional trajectories and expertise.

This document is a basic English version of [the publication](#).

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Summary

Moving Borders – Changing Dance Practices by Monica Gillette

This essay explains how the Moving Borders project, initiated in 2023, learns from Ukrainian dance artists displaced by the 2022 Russian invasion. It describes how they are using their artistic practices to navigate trauma and rebuild their lives. As global conflicts increase and cultural funding decreases, the project highlights the vital role of art in fostering community and resilience.

The essay looks into what dance practice is and how for these artists, dance is no longer just a profession; it is a pathway for healing and connection. Their bodies, often their only "home," have become central to their practice. One artist noted, "Dancing helps me stay strong," while others discovered that teaching dance to refugee children and women created vital community bonds, helping participants find safety and expression. This essay explores how dance practices developed in a crisis can support not only refugees but also their new communities. The dancers also re-examined their traditional training and are now creating work that is more aligned with their personal values, emphasising well-being and inclusion. Ultimately, their stories demonstrate how dance can be a form of resistance, helping them reclaim their identity and humanity in a time of uncertainty.

Situated Research in Unstable Contexts by Luisella Carnelli

This essay reflects on the Moving Borders project, which studied how Ukrainian dance artists — forced to leave their country due to war — navigated new lives in Europe. Instead of using fixed research methods, the team stayed close to real experiences, observing how artists and cultural organisations adapted over time. The research showed that integration isn't a clear path or single event. It's a complex, ongoing process shaped by emotions, relationships, and uneven systems. Artists weren't just recipients of help — they created communities, shared knowledge, and led their own forms of care and creativity.

The essay also shows how cultural spaces became places of support and connection during a crisis, even though many lacked the resources to keep this going long-term. Artists asked not for charity, but for fair conditions: space to heal, to work, and to be seen as full people beyond their nationality. In the end, the project calls for cultural sectors to rethink how they support artists during times of upheaval — and to treat imagination, care, and movement as vital tools for creating a more just and connected world.

Broader Horizons by Karina Buckley

The essay reflects on the Moving Borders project, which brought together Ukrainian dancers who had to flee their country due to war. Through workshops across Europe, these artists explored how trauma, displacement, and new environments affected their bodies, their creativity, and their sense of identity. The writer shares a personal moment of injury and how it helped her connect more deeply with the project's focus on the body as a site of healing, memory, and resilience.

The project showed that dance can help people reconnect with themselves and others, especially during times of crisis. Whether dancing in nature, working with children, or sharing cultural traditions, the artists used movement to build community, find joy, and resist being defined by their trauma. Their stories remind us that the body is our first home — and through it, we can recover a sense of belonging, even in unfamiliar places. Ultimately, the project suggests that healing and hope come when we care for ourselves and each other — across all borders.

Moving Borders – Changing Dance Practices (Simplified English version)

By Monica Gillette

The *Moving Borders* project started in 2023. It began because of the war in Ukraine, after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Many Ukrainian dance artists had to leave their country and find safety in Europe. Some dance organizations used their personal connections to help these artists find places to live and work. The dancers were dealing with sudden changes, trauma and life as refugees.

At the time, this war on the edge of Europe was a big focus. But during the project, challenges increased across the world—conflicts, fear, and growing divisions between people. Support for each other started to fade, and cultural projects, like dance, were often the first things to lose funding.

But culture and art are most important during hard times. People need strong communities that bring together different backgrounds. Art, especially community-based dance, helps people connect and become stronger together.

Recently, artists have noticed that the art world is not as united as it used to be. In the past, many people in the arts shared similar political values. But now, people are often judged by where they come from or what passport they have. This has caused division. So now we ask: what can dance teach us about living through pain and conflict?

Dance Practice as Support

Dance has always helped people in tough times—whether facing physical, mental, or social problems. The *Moving Borders* project looked at how Ukrainian dancers are changing their practices as they settle in new places across Europe. It focused on how dance can be a tool for healing, connection, and strength.

What is a dance practice?

A practice is something you do regularly. In dance, a practice is often physical and based on body awareness. It is a way of learning through the body. For the Ukrainian dancers, these body-based practices became important for feeling better and rebuilding their lives. Dance helped them stay connected to who they are and to the people around them.

Some dancers wondered if dancing still mattered during a war. One artist said: *"When the war started, I didn't want to dance—it didn't protect borders. But now, dancing helps me stay strong."* This shows how dance can offer comfort, healing, and a way to stay grounded during difficult times.

Connecting with Communities

Many Ukrainian dancers used their skills to connect with others. They taught dance to Ukrainian children and women in their new towns. These classes helped people release emotions, feel joy, and create bonds. Some of the local citizens joined too.

For children affected by war, dance workshops helped them feel safe again. They slowly began to trust others, make eye contact, and express themselves through movement.

One dancer said teaching helped her reconnect with people after feeling alone. It helped her focus less on worries and more on community. For many, dance became a way to meet

basic needs—like feeling safe, trusting others, and having a voice.

These stories show that practices developed during a crisis can help not only refugees, but also local communities who face their own problems.

The Body as a Home

For dancers who lost their homes, their own bodies became “home” themselves. Some workshops in the project helped artists feel their body’s edges again—something important when real borders have been broken. By moving together, dancers asked: Who was I before? Who am I now? Dance became both a way to ask questions and a way to answer them.

At one workshop in Arte Sella (an outdoor art space in Italy), dancers moved in nature. The natural land reminded them of the unstable lives they now live. They asked themselves: “Can I still enjoy movement, even if the ground is not flat?” They practiced how to fall and get back up—both in dance and in life.

One dancer described how their bodies felt like “sacred but with a cancelled future.” But movement helped them find new hope and connection.

Artistic Changes and Cultural Reflection

The war also made Ukrainian dancers think about how they were trained. Many learned in systems influenced by Russian dance schools, which were often strict and used shame as a teaching method. The dancers started to question this history and its effects.

Some dancers said it took the trauma of war to realize what they were taught and how it shaped them. Now, in Europe, they’re discovering new ways to create dance. Many say this is the first time their work has been respected for what it is.

They are now mixing old and new ideas, making dance that fits their values today. They noticed that in some places, dance is more about fairness, well-being, and inclusion. This change is helping them grow as artists in ways they didn’t expect.

Finding Meaning and Strength

For many, dance used to be just a job. Now, it’s something much more. After the war began, one artist said: *“Before, art was an opportunity. Now, it’s a need. People need art to survive.”*

Some dancers are now more careful about which projects they accept. They choose work that reflects their values and helps others. Some are creating dance outside theaters, using improvisation to explore change and uncertainty.

At the same time, they became more critical of performances that seem disconnected from the world’s problems. They want dance to mean something—something real, something that helps.

Dance as Resistance

For many Ukrainian dancers, dance became a kind of resistance. It helped them say: *We are still here. We are more than victims.*

Dancing helped them stay connected to their identity, their community, and their purpose. It could not stop bombs—but it could protect their humanity.

Their journey shows that dance holds deep knowledge. It helps people rebuild their lives and create community. What started as a way to survive became a way to grow and support others.

As the world faces more crises, the work of these dancers gives us ideas and inspiration. Their creativity and strength offer lessons on how to stay connected and move forward, even when the future is unknown.

Situated Research in Unstable Contexts (Simplified English)

By Luisella Carnelli

Moving Borders wasn't just about people who had to leave their country. It was about understanding what makes all of us feel unsettled.

This research didn't offer clear answers.

Instead, it followed small actions and quiet moments.

It focused on the body — on dancing — as a way to stay grounded, to connect with others, and to make sense of a broken world.

The research doesn't end.

It pauses, like taking a breath.

It leaves questions hanging: How can we move gently when everything keeps changing?

How can we stay close when the world pushes us apart?

Maybe the answer isn't about holding on tightly,
but learning to move together — even if we don't know the steps.

Listening While Moving

When Moving Borders started in 2022, the war in Ukraine had just gotten worse. Cultural groups across Europe rushed to help. Our research began at that urgent moment. We wanted to learn how to welcome and support Ukrainian dance artists who had been forced to flee — and how to be ready to help again in the future. But over the two years that followed, we saw that things weren't simple. While the war went on, organisations moved from emergency action to a kind of routine. The same thing happened to the artists. They had to keep adjusting and finding ways to continue, even when everything around them kept changing.

This research tried to stay close to that change. We didn't want to look from the outside, but to stay involved, even when it was hard. We paid attention to how people moved, related, and adapted. We wanted to understand not just what people did, but how it felt, how it shifted over time, and what it said about our ability to offer care and support.

The border wasn't just something you cross — it was something people felt in their bodies, relationships, and work. Our research also became part of this border. It had to stay flexible and open, ready to move with the people and situations we were studying.

We used simple research tools: two online surveys, interviews, group talks, and observation. These weren't just ways to collect facts — they were spaces for shared reflection. They helped people talk about their experiences and imagine new ways to work and connect.

We looked at what happened over time. That helped us see the bigger picture: how support often fades, how integration isn't straightforward, and how helping artists needs to be a long-term effort.

In the end, this research wasn't just about looking back. It was about getting ready — for whatever comes next.

What We Learned: Integration Is Not One Clear Path

People often think of integration as something you reach — a clear goal. But our research showed it's much more complex. It's not one path, but many small steps. It's shaped by laws, local systems, and the relationships between artists,

organisations, and communities.

Some cultural groups changed a lot after working with Ukrainian artists. Others didn't. The support offered was uneven: some gave housing or money, but few offered long-term help like mentorship or creative space. Some artists felt welcome; others felt like outsiders. Where artists ended up made a big difference. Some places supported close, creative work. Others focused on short events or visibility. The way integration worked depended on both people and places.

The gaps we saw weren't just about money. They showed that the cultural sector has limits when it comes to long-term care. In this setting, integration wasn't a box to tick. It was an ongoing process — shaped by effort, emotion, and uneven systems.

From Emergency to Ongoing Support

At first, many cultural organisations responded quickly. They offered space, funding, and community. But over time, energy and resources faded. The needs didn't go away — but the attention did.

Only a few organisations kept offering long-term help. Most focused on short-term stays. Some groups admitted that they didn't have the tools or money to continue. This pattern is common in crisis response: lots of support early on, followed by burnout or shifting focus. Artists noticed this too. Some said the early excitement was replaced by silence. This showed how fragile support systems can be. To move from short-term help to lasting inclusion, we have to name this fatigue. It's not about blame — it's about building systems that don't vanish when the crisis fades.

Artists as Leaders and Community Builders

One key finding was that artists didn't just receive help — they also created it. Many set up dance classes, workshops, and informal spaces for others. These activities gave them purpose, built connections, and often included people beyond the Ukrainian community.

Artist networks also mattered. These peer groups shared advice, support, and visibility. As one artist said: "When institutions disappear, we find each other." This was clear during a workshop at Arte Sella. Nature, dance, and community came together. Artists used movement to deal with instability and to imagine new ways of living and working. Organisations that supported these self-run efforts built stronger, more equal relationships. Those that treated artists only as guests missed the value and creativity they brought.

This breaks the usual idea that help flows one way. Artists were not just guests — they were guides, teachers, and connectors. True support means recognising their role and making space for it.

Cultural Organisations: What Changed and What Didn't

Working with displaced artists helped many cultural groups think in new ways. They became more aware of the emotions involved in hosting. Some shifted their way of working — planning with, not just for, artists.

But these changes were often hard to keep. Some groups couldn't make this work part of their long-term plans. Short funding cycles and staff changes made it difficult.

This tension — between good intentions and real limits — was common. Many organisations wanted to change, but didn't always have the tools. This isn't failure. It's a sign of how hard it is to make deep, lasting change without stronger support. It shows we need to think bigger: not just about what one group can do, but what the whole sector can commit to.

True change takes time, effort, and structure. It means seeing hosting not as a one-off act of kindness, but as a shared responsibility.

Cultural Spaces as Places of Care

Another big lesson was that cultural organisations are more than just places for art. In a crisis, they often become places of care — offering shelter, support, and connection.

This was most visible in small groups deeply connected to their communities. They did things like help with housing, mental health, and translation. These acts weren't dramatic, but they mattered.

Still, many groups said they couldn't keep doing this without proper support. They were stepping in where official services fell short — but often without the resources or recognition.

If we want cultural spaces to keep playing this role, we need to support them properly. That means funding, policies, and partnerships that treat them as part of the social fabric.

Imagination Without Borders

This project didn't just collect data — it stirred emotions. It moved between urgency and care, action and exhaustion.

Language — both spoken and physical — played a big role. Sometimes words weren't enough. Artists asked to be seen as more than just "Ukrainian artists." They wanted space to be full people, not symbols of a crisis.

Borders aren't just lines on a map. They're things people feel — in their bodies, in their relationships, in their limits. Some speakers asked us to think about how fear and systems block our imagination — and how breaking those inner borders might let us imagine a better world.

Imagination isn't extra. It's a way to resist. It helps us dream new futures based on real experiences.

Artists carry powerful knowledge. Their stories aren't just personal — they reveal patterns and needs. When we listen, we see what kind of care, justice, and systems we need.

What Artists Asked For

As the project grew, artists shared not just what happened, but what they hoped for:

- Time and space to heal and create
- The chance to work on long-term projects
- To be seen as equals, not just guests

- Help with housing, emotional support, and building local relationships • Mentors who respect them
- To be recognised beyond their national identity

What they want isn't charity. It's fair. They ask for spaces where they can be both vulnerable and strong — where they can create, heal, and be seen.

Moving Forward

Moving Borders wasn't just a project. It was a journey through uncertainty. It showed both the cracks in our systems and the deep desire to act with care. The lessons aren't final. They're still unfolding. But they help us see the roles that artists, researchers, and organisations can play in a world shaped by crisis and movement. Dance helped people listen, connect, and imagine new ways forward. It reminded us that movement can be more than art — it can be a way to build community and hope.

For researchers, this means staying flexible and close to people. For cultural workers, it means building systems that hold care, not just good intentions. For institutions, it means investing in shared responsibility.

If borders are something we feel, not just cross, maybe our job isn't to escape them — but to stay with them, learn from them, and move together. And maybe dance — gentle, quiet, open — already knows how to do that. Maybe that's where we begin.

Broader Horizons (Simplified English version)

By Karina Buckley

The Moving Borders project began in the middle of winter. I was there as the dance writer, ready to keep a journal of the workshops. On the first day, it snowed. It looked beautiful. But the next morning, the icy streets were dangerous. I slipped and fell on a Paris sidewalk. I broke a tooth and had to go to the emergency room. It was a small injury, but it left me feeling shaken. I was angry at myself for falling, and upset with my body for not protecting me.

That was how I started Anna Kushnirenko's workshop on the third day. Anna is one of the three Ukrainian dancers leading the project. Of course, her experience with war is far more serious than my fall. But what she taught helped me. She said our skin is both a border and a bridge between our inner lives and the outside world. She asked us to treat our skin with the same care a mother gives her child. That simple act changed how I felt. It helped me see my body as something precious, not something broken. It also gave me a new way to understand the Moving Borders project. Many of us don't realise how easily our lives can change. A personal crisis, a war, or losing a job can make us feel lost. We try to find safety again. We think about who we are, and who we want to be. We look for hope. This is something many people go through at some point in life. For Ukrainians, that moment came in 2022 when their country was invaded.

Moving Borders is a project that follows the journey of Ukrainian dance artists who had to leave their country. Each of the three main dancers held workshops for ten other Ukrainian artists living in exile. In these workshops, they looked at how leaving home had changed their dance, their ideas, and their ways of working. Without planning it, their workshops followed the levels of human needs — starting with safety and leading to self-expression and growth.

Body Awareness

At our first meeting in Paris, Giacomo Bianchi from Arte Sella reminded us that every person who visits their outdoor art space comes not just with a mind, but with a body. This fits with what brain expert Antonio Damasio says — that feelings and the body help shape our thoughts. In his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk explains that simple actions like breathing, moving, or touch can help people heal from trauma.

After two years of war, trauma was everywhere in the workshops. Many artists felt numb or disconnected from their bodies. Some said they couldn't perform or create. When they worked with children, they noticed that some kids didn't want to be touched or to join in. To help, the dancers used soft movements, touch, and quiet exercises to bring body and mind back together.

Therapist Jenny Fahy explained that when people are very stressed, they react in two ways. Sometimes the body gets overexcited (fight or flight), and sometimes it shuts down. In that shut-down state, the body can't follow steps or routines. Gentle, free movement can help rebuild trust in the body.

Many dancers said that contact improvisation helped open them up. It calmed their mind and made them feel more connected, even during a time of loss and change.

Dancing in Nature

Poet Mary Oliver once wrote, "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." Human beings often forget they are part of nature, but this project showed how important that connection is.

Some artists worked with Ukrainian children in parks. They danced barefoot, splashed in water, pretended to be animals, and drew on the ground. They took moments to ask the children how they felt. One artist said her group stopped everything just to watch a dog play in a pond. It might have seemed small, but it gave the kids joy — and joy is part of healing.

Jenny Fahy explained why these moments matter. In war, you lose control. You don't get to say yes or no. In recovery, it's important to make your own choices again. Children (and adults) need to feel safe enough to be spontaneous and playful. When adults create a safe space, children often know how to heal themselves. At Arte Sella, the artists had three days in nature. It was quiet, open, and full of trees and fresh air. People breathed more deeply, moved more freely, and felt less tense. Being in nature helped their nervous systems relax. It helped them connect with each other. One woman said that dancing made her feel like part of a bird flock. Sometimes you're in front, sometimes you're behind — but you're always together. That gave her hope.

Borders and Belonging

Each workshop created a kind of home. The artists felt understood, even if they didn't share a language. Just being around others who knew what they'd been through gave them comfort.

In one online session, Serbian dance writer Maja Hriešik talked about how hard it was to express herself when she moved to Slovakia in the 1990s. She chose dance because it let her communicate without words. Dance helped her go beyond language and connect with people on a deeper level.

But language is just one part of the problem. In another session, dancer Polina Bulat talked about feeling unsure about being called a "Ukrainian artist." She worried people were only interested in her work because of the war. When she lived in Ukraine, she didn't think much about her identity. But now, as a minority, she feels she has to change parts of herself to fit in.

Anthropologist Shahram Khosravi said that borders treat people differently, depending on race, gender, or sexuality. If you don't notice a border, it's probably not affecting you. He said that art, and dance especially, helps people cross those lines. Dance lets us touch, not just watch. It reminds us of our shared humanity. Norwegian dancer Mia Habib said that dance can help us see the people we usually ignore or misunderstand. It helps us challenge the ways we see others as "less than" or "the enemy."

Many artists said they had built strong ties in their new homes through dance. One even started a class that attracted migrant students who didn't feel welcome with local teachers. Her outsider status made her easier to relate to. Another artist became a beloved teacher in her new host country — so much so that one organisation called her their best addition in years.

Dance, Identity, and Resistance

Folk and national dances gave the artists a way to reconnect with their roots. One artist said

that when she was a child, speaking Ukrainian was seen as something only rural people did. Now, she sees her culture in a new light — and wants to reclaim it.

This pride is shared by Ukraine's cultural leaders. In Paris, artist Natalya Guzneko Boudier said that Ukraine sees its artists as part of how it will rebuild after the war. But not all artists want to look only to the past. Zimbabwean dancer nora chipaumire said she's searching for something more real. She wants to find ways of moving that reflect deep cultural knowledge, not just government-approved ideas of tradition. Palestinian choreographer Nur Garabli said her use of the folk dance Dabke helps her take back something that belongs to her culture. The dance comes from farming traditions and is full of planting and harvesting gestures. It tells stories through the body and shows how much we share, even with people who seem very different. Some artists said that dancing helped them understand themselves better than a passport ever could. They felt that their true identity lives in their bodies. Therapist Jenny Fahy agrees. She says that when people follow their body's natural movement, it leads them toward healing. We don't have to force it. The body knows what it needs.

Becoming Whole

Many artists said the war made them rethink their lives. They now know what they want — and what they don't want. They also want the role of the dancer to be taken more seriously in Ukraine. Some found that leaving home gave them new opportunities to grow and to earn a living from their art. One said: "I'm sad that it happened this way, but I'm also grateful. I've met so many people and learned so much. I'm more open-minded now."

It reminds me of the saying: don't waste a crisis. We may not control what happens, but we can choose how we respond. Hard times can lead to growth if we let them. From birth, we learn through movement. We express ourselves through our bodies before we know how to speak. Our body is the one thing we always own. No matter how we feel about it, it is enough.

The body is what makes us human. It's what someone once cared for with great love and effort. It deserves care, choice, and a voice. War takes that away. So does illness or grief. Dance can give it back.

The Ukrainian artists in Moving Borders have shown us this. Their stories are different from ours, but the lessons are shared. In the end, there is no "them" and "us" — there is only all of us, together.

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