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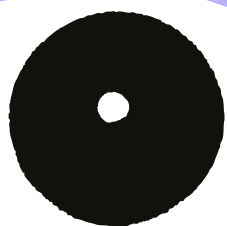
European
Dance Development
Network

ROOTING FUTURES

Young Cultural Workers in Rural Areas

ORIENTE OCCIDENTE

Introduction

The EDN Atelier *Rooting Futures – Young Dance Artists and Curators in Rural Areas* took place in Rovereto (Italy) on 4–5 November 2025, hosted by Oriente Occidente, a cultural centre for contemporary dance located in the Alpine city of Rovereto, a peripheral but vibrant context, far from major cultural hubs such as Milan, Rome, or Turin. This setting, with its strong connection to the surrounding territory and its rural and mountain communities, offered a meaningful framework to explore the theme of young cultural workers in rural areas.
This Atelier was the first within the EDN's new YOUNG stakeholder commission, dedicated to community-engaged practices focused on young audiences, artists and professionals. Conceived not only as a space for analysis but also for questioning, the Atelier aimed to open reflections, raise new perspectives, and generate conversations that will inform future steps of the network's work on this topic.

A key curatorial choice was to entrust **the conception and design of the Atelier** to a **group of young curators from EDN member organisations.** This decision ensured that the event was truly shaped by young professionals, for young professionals, and about young professionals, offering them **agency and empowerment** from the very process of curation itself.
Equally essential was the **participation of young people** themselves: the Atelier gathered 32 participants from 11 countries, including 26 under 35 and 6 under 25. This composition made it possible to create a genuinely **peer-to-peer working environment;** a space for exchange, collaboration, and collective thinking among young cultural workers from across Europe.

The Atelier revolved around **four main areas of reflection,** which shaped both its conceptual and practical framework:

1. **Building alliances between artists and institutions.**
   This focus sought to investigate how sustainable and honest collaborations can be built within the cultural field. It asked what it means to create alliances between artists, curators, and institutions that are based on mutual understanding rather than hierarchy, and how such relationships can evolve into long-term structures of care and advocacy.

2. **The storytelling issue: finding the right language to communicate with different stakeholders.**
   This theme invited participants to reflect on communication as a relational practice: how to translate and reframe one's artistic or curatorial work according to context, while staying true to its essence. It questioned how we can develop forms of storytelling capable of bridging gaps between artistic vision, institutional expectations, and community understanding.

3. **Engaging local communities through artistic practice.**
   This line of inquiry aimed to explore how artistic work can emerge from, respond to, and collaborate with local contexts. It encouraged reflection on how to engage communities not merely as audiences but as co-creators and sources of knowledge, and on how natural and social spaces can become sites for shared cultural and artistic processes.

4. **Creating and maintaining peer networks at local and international levels.**
   Finally, this focus aimed to reflect on how young cultural workers can build and sustain networks of exchange that transcend geographical borders. It questioned what forms of connection and collective organisation can support ongoing learning, solidarity, and artistic growth, while remaining sensitive to local contexts and realities.

The programme combined theoretical and practical approaches, alternating between reflective discussions and embodied sessions. Alongside the workshops and labs led by invited guests, participants engaged in moments of internal discussion and peer exchange.
These included the one-to-one conversations between artists and curators, structured as a "speed-date" format, where participants were invited to reflect together on questions such as:

1. Can you remember a healthy, interesting collaboration with an artist/curator? What made it successful?
2. A small shift that could make a big difference: what makes you feel seen and heard in partnerships?
3. How can artists and curators still support each other when their artistic visions don't align?

Further exploration took place in the Conversational Space, facilitated through an Open Space Technology format, where participants collectively addressed the following themes:

1. Local communities and artistic practice, starting from concrete projects.
2. Collaboration between young artists, curators, and artistic institutions.

3. Networks and structures for young cultural operators in peripheral areas, rooted in local projects.
4. Sharing of personal artistic projects and trajectories.
5. Barriers and accessibility in the cultural sector, and the role of cultural workers with disabilities.

Informal moments such as shared lunches, coffee breaks, and attendance at an evening dance performance also played an essential role in shaping the atmosphere of the Atelier. These encounters strengthened the sense of group belonging, encouraged dialogue beyond the formal sessions, and allowed participants to further develop ideas and connections in a more spontaneous way.

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The Storytelling Issue

The theme of *storytelling* was introduced through the workshop led by **'Funmi Adewole.** Starting from the question *"What is storytelling?",* the session became a catalyst for a wider reflection that extended throughout the two days, influencing both the group discussions and the informal exchanges among participants.

The lab explored storytelling as both a **tool and a mindset;** a way to understand how we, as cultural workers, communicate our work, frame our contexts, and relate to others. Storytelling was not presented as a linear narrative exercise, but as a **relational practice:** a way to inhabit our positions, to question where we stand, and to understand how meaning shifts depending on context. As emerged during the session, *"art is knowing where you stand."*

Storytelling as reflection and structure

The reflection proposed by 'Funmi began with a deceptively simple question: *What is storytelling?*

This led to a broader inquiry into how artistic work becomes meaningful within a specific context. Everyone dances and creates in their daily life; what artists do is **formalise** that impulse and shift it into another frame. And when the frame changes, the meaning changes with it. Knowing the context is essential.

In this sense, culture itself becomes an intervention, a deliberate act. And because of this, we also need to take responsibility for the ways we narrate it: *we need to own its storytelling.*

Storytelling was therefore framed as both a **narrative practice** and an **empathic one;** a way of sharing ideas while also understanding one's position within a wider landscape. It can help focus a project, structure it according to the environment in which it operates, and also challenge it. To explore this, participants were introduced to a series of storytelling models. Not as formulas to follow, but as frameworks to interrogate context:

→ the **story arc,** moving from exposition to resolution;
→ the **playwright model,** identifying premise, characters, conflict;
→ the **5W + 1H method** *(who, what, when, where, why, how);*
→ and **storywriting components,** such as plot, setting, theme, point of view.

Using these models, the group reflected on the idea of looking at one's work as a narrative with its own internal tension. Having a **protagonist** in your story means also allowing space for an **antagonist.** Not in a negative sense, but as the necessary counterforce that pushes the story forward. Participants were invited to ask themselves periodically: *What do I want for my work? What is its story right now?*

Because *the way you tell your story to yourself shapes not only what you do, but how you relate to others.*

In this sense, storytelling becomes a cyclical practice of self-alignment; a way to refocus, to reframe, and to remain attentive to the evolving relationship between one's intentions and one's context.

Storytelling in the cultural sector

The conversation later moved to the cultural field, where storytelling was recognised as a key skill for communication and advocacy. *Public relations is storytelling;* the ability to bring others into one's world, to translate ideas into accessible language, and to show why artistic work matters. Participants discussed the need to develop different languages depending on the conversation partner: be it founders, communities, or audiences. Storytelling here becomes a flexible instrument to bridge contexts and make artistic practices understandable and relevant across sectors:

→ **Funders:** focus on outcomes, impact, sustainability.
→ **Communities:** focus on relevance, accessibility, benefit.
→ **Artists:** focus on process, technique, conceptual framework.
→ **Institutions:** focus on mission alignment, prestige, reach.
→ **Public / Audiences:** focus on experience, emotion, and story.

The workshop thus highlighted how storytelling operates at many levels, from internal reflection to external communication, and how mastering this dialogue between forms, audiences, and intentions is part of the daily practice of being a cultural worker today.

Choosing stories, generating sensations

Storytelling also implies choice: the awareness that one cannot tell every story, or include everyone's perspective. Each narrative is a selection, an act of focus. As 'Funmi put it, storytelling means deciding *which story to tell.*

From this came a reflection on **attention and perception:** how to generate sensations, sustain tension, and guide the audience's experience. Participants discussed the balance between stories and issues, and how different formats: text, image, movement, sound, can evoke different understandings and emotional landscapes.
Finally, storytelling was framed not as a static act but as an evolving process: stories must be allowed to transform, to surprise, to open new paths. As emerged in the final exchange: *let your story have the possibility to evolve into something unexpected.*

Building Alliances

The second thematic focus of the Atelier, *building alliances,* was shaped through multiple layers of the programme: the workshop by **Silvia Bottiroli,** several reflections from **'Funmi Adewole,** the artist–curator speed-date conversations, and discussions within the conversational space. Together, these contributions opened a collective exploration into how cultural workers can build meaningful, sustainable alliances in rural and peripheral areas.

Mapping the dramaturgies of a practice

Silvia's workshop introduced a crucial distinction between **minor dramaturgy,** the internal structure of a work, and **major dramaturgy,** the wider ecosystem surrounding it. The major dramaturgy encompasses the network of relations that connect a project to its environment: the space where it happens, the communities it touches, the institutions around it, the histories it echoes, the tensions it provokes.
Recognising this expanded field means acknowledging that every project already has a life beyond itself. Mapping it can assist artists and curators in:

1. **Clarifying their focus,** understanding what they are actually doing, where emphasis lies, and what remains underdeveloped.
2. **Identifying alliances,** recognising who is already supporting their work, who is absent, and where new potential connections might arise.

Changing scale, zooming in and out of one's project, helps reveal its different layers: its centre, its peripheries, its resonances, and its blind spots. This shift of perception allows practitioners to understand not only what they touch, but also what they do not reach, enabling more conscious decisions about where to place attention and how to build connections.

Mapping, here, is not a strategy for expansion, but a tool to acknowledge agencies, recognise landscapes, and understand how one's work inhabits the world.

This led to a set of guiding questions:
What am I busy with? Where is the emphasis? Who are my allies? Who do I choose as "friends"? What am I missing? To whom is this irrelevant, and do I care?

From recognition comes the possibility of developing a strategy.

Artist–curator: building trust, transparency, shared ground

The artist–curator speed dates were designed precisely to address the gap that both groups often perceive between their roles, and to create a safe, direct space for questioning how alliances can be built in practice.

Across the conversations, several themes consistently emerged:

→ Trust and transparency are fundamental.
→ Expectations need to be shared clearly and communicated early.
→ Collaboration requires time, resources, and ongoing dialogue.
→ A curator's presence, seeing the artist's work, being there, is a form of recognition.
→ "Any answer is better than no answer": communication itself builds care.
→ Supporting people rather than projects can be generative, but also requires awareness to avoid gatekeeping.
→ Even when artistic visions diverge, a starting point can be found by identifying shared ground.

The speed dates revealed how much alliances depend on relational depth rather than perfect alignment.

Artists/curators and institutions: creating conditions for mutual trust

The group also explored how to build alliances between cultural workers and institutions, particularly in rural or peripheral areas, where institutional structures are often limited. Here too, trust, transparency, and shared purpose emerged as guiding principles.

Key reflections included:

→ If institutions wish to keep creatives in rural areas, they must create real opportunities for them.
→ Open dialogue about money is essential: networking, administration, and development are all forms of work.
→ Collaboration can grow through friction as well as harmony; alliances do not need to avoid conflict.
→ Working within institutions can become a way to gently challenge or reshape them.

Participants identified reciprocal benefits:

For artists/curators: visibility, credibility, funding access, broader outreach, space for experimentation.

For institutions: new audiences, stronger connections with local communities and emerging artists, lower production costs, enriched cultural offerings.
The emphasis was on recognising each other's constraints and ecosystems, and on building alliances that sustain both sides.

Public–private alliances: formats that build shared ground

The final set of discussions focused on alliances between cultural workers and the private sector. Here, the priority was again building **trust, transparency, and shared ground,** but through **formats** capable of shifting perceptions and generating encounters.
Participants explored how innovative or "clashing" formats, such as a club night inside a museum or a queer event inside a heteronormative venue, can open new spaces of collaboration and challenge existing structures.
Such alliances require teams who are prepared, informed, and willing to embrace experimentation, and they rely heavily on people with strong relations and trust within local or underground scenes.

Engaging Local Communities

The third focus of the Atelier, engaging local communities, took shape through the workshop led by **Samara Hersch,** alongside questions raised in group discussions and the conversational space. The theme resonated strongly among participants working in rural and peripheral contexts, where artistic practices often intersect with tight-knit local realities, intergenerational dynamics, and the need to build trust slowly and respectfully.

Starting from questions: the lab with Samara Hersch

Samara opened her workshop by gathering questions from participants that revealed the plurality of their concerns and the depth of their experiences:

→ *How do we build consistent, long-term relationships with communities?*
→ *How can I connect with the communities in these areas as an artist?*
→ *How do we engage new publics for dance?*
→ *How do we move from one place to another, navigating different communities?*
→ *How do we engage younger generations?*

These questions set the tone for a session grounded not in fixed methods but in **listening, responsiveness,** and **situated knowledge.**

Samara introduced *Body of Knowledge,* a project in which adults engage in phone conversations with teenagers who guide them through reflections and physical tasks. The work explores how bodies affect one another, how proximity and distance shape relationships, and how intergenerational encounters can open sensitive political questions.

The lab focused on:

→ practising the confidence to stay in a conversation (even by phone),
→ building individual and small-group dialogues,
→ understanding how to invite young people to speak about vulnerable themes.

Participants explored tools Samara has used: music chosen by the group, mind-mapping platforms like Coggle, and trust-building strategies such as asking where a question comes from before posing it to others.
An exercise on *care* invited participants to map what they care about, do not care about, want to care more or less about, and who or what cares for them – revealing how community engagement often begins with shared vulnerability.

Who is the community?
Where do we stand?

A key thread in the discussion was the need to question the very idea of "community."
Who are we referring to? Are we inside it, outside it, or somewhere in between?
Understanding one's position is essential for approaching people with respect and clarity.

Participants emphasised the importance of:

→ learning about the community's needs, histories, and desires;
→ starting from what already exists;
→ recognising that people bring vast knowledge and that participation can actually create community, not just activate it.

This led to a central question:
Which ethics guide our engagement?
How do we approach queer communities, rural communities, young people, or any group that may feel marginalised or suspicious of cultural institutions?

Strategies for trust, participation, and shared space

The group identified several strategies for building trust and facilitating participation:

1. Language and communication
   → Use accessible language to find common ground.
   → "Spread the word" through multiple channels, but prioritise individual conversations.
   → Build shared playlists or visual tools that reflect the group's identities and interests.
   This connected back to the storytelling work from 'Funmi's session: language is never neutral, and choosing the right one can create an opening.

2. The role of the artist
Participants reflected on the ambiguity of being both artist and facilitator:
   → Is the artist giving power to the participants?
   → How much power can they actually give?
   → Artists are *not* social workers, and should not be expected to play that role. Engagement must hold both care and boundaries.

3. Working with space
Theatres and cultural venues can feel intimidating.
Strategies included:
   → making a space more comfortable through narrative and framing,
   → using social-story formats to show what entering a venue looks like,
   → or, most importantly, **going into the community's own spaces** first. This shift helps reposition the institution not as a gatekeeper but as a guest.

4. Working with content and form
Participants stressed the need for open, loose structures that allow people to enter and exit freely.
Multidisciplinarity helps:
   → start from forms familiar to the community (K-pop, Latin dance, music-based practices) and gradually build bridges toward dance as an artistic expression,
   → ask participants what they want, then negotiate what can be offered,
   → address sensitive themes with care, acknowledging different comfort levels.

Impact, long-term relations, and policy

A major reflection concerned the importance of **long-term relationships** and the political dimension of community engagement.
In rural contexts, building **alliances with policymakers** is often easier than in large cities, where institutional layers and bureaucratic distances are greater. In smaller territories, decision-makers tend to be more accessible, the chain of mediation is shorter, and initiating a direct conversation is often more feasible.
This proximity can open valuable opportunities for cultural workers to advocate for their communities and co-shape local cultural policies.

Participants discussed how:

→ long-term projects can become vehicles for local policy change,
→ artists and communities can jointly advocate for access, inclusion, and cultural infrastructure,
→ and how shared movement with cultural workers and citizens together can create genuine transformation.

Engaging communities, then, becomes not only a matter of artistic practice but also of contributing to a shared cultural and civic ecology.

Networking

If the Atelier made one thing clear, it is that young cultural workers need networks. Not as a generic ideal, but as a constellation of relationships with different functions, intensities, and timescales. Networking emerged organically across workshops, speed-dates, discussions, and informal moments, revealing its role as both a professional tool and a form of collective care.

Different networks for different needs

Participants emphasised that no single network can respond to all needs. We need multiple, overlapping networks to address different communities:

– spaces for professional development,
– spaces for artistic dialogue,
– spaces for economic support,
– and spaces for long-term collaboration.

Peer networks were repeatedly described as *mirrors* that help young professionals understand their own trajectory within the field. This held especially true for participants navigating marginalised pathways, such as artists with disabilities, who stressed the importance of networks where experiences can be openly shared and reinterpreted. Being in dialogue with others, whether in similar or radically different conditions, allows assumptions to be questioned: *What is considered a "normal path" for a dancer? And how does this change for a dancer with a disability?* These exchanges help reveal blind spots and highlight the diversity of trajectories, especially within a sector that often implicitly reproduces narrow models of success.

Building connections across distance

Participants also reflected on the complexity of **mobility.** Maintaining professional networks beyond one's immediate context often requires travel, which can be a privilege for some and an obligation or impossibility for others. Mobility is shaped not only by personal circumstances but also by structural factors such as the power of a passport, financial accessibility, and the availability of local opportunities. This raised important questions of responsibility within international networks: *What can I do with the privilege I have? How can mobility be redistributed, supported, or reimagined?*

In this landscape, **digital spaces become essential tools** rather than secondary solutions. Online platforms allow young professionals to stay connected over time, share resources, and nurture long-term relationships across distance. For those based in rural or peripheral areas, digital networking helps counterbalance geographical isolation and sustains communities that cannot always convene physically. However, this potential remains uneven, as many rural territories still face significant disparities in access to reliable digital infrastructures.

Networks as ecosystems of trust

Trust emerged as a foundational condition for meaningful networking. Participants noted that trust grows through consistency, transparency, and the willingness to listen. Mapping exercises, where individuals selected and responded to ideas written by others, demonstrated how quickly *webs of trust* can form when the environment is held with care.
These webs are both relational and strategic: they allow young professionals to recognise affinities, articulate needs, identify potential allies, and acknowledge differences without collapsing them.

Networking for funding and opportunity

A strong emphasis was placed on the importance of networks in accessing funding and professional opportunities. Connections across regions and sectors can open doors that remain closed in more isolated contexts. In many cases, participants observed that **funding follows networks:** knowing where resources lie, how institutions operate, and which partnerships strengthen an application can substantially shape career development. *Impact,* rather than geographical location, was often identified as the key factor, and networks can amplify both visibility and reach.

Toward reciprocal and adaptive support structures

Finally, conversations pointed toward a shift from one-directional notions of support to more reciprocal, empowering relationships. Participants asked: *Who can I support? What do they need from me? How do support structures adapt as contexts change?* Support, whether artistic, financial, or relational, is always situated and must remain fluid, responsive, and attentive to shifting priorities, shifting policies, and shifting communities.

Final wrap-up

Over the course of two days of shared practice, questioning, and exchange, the Atelier "Rooting Futures" became exactly what it set out to be: a temporary community of young cultural workers from across Europe, gathered to reflect on the conditions of their work and collectively imagine future pathways. The Atelier created a rare peer-to-peer environment where young professionals could speak openly, honestly, and on equal ground.

What emerged strongly is that, because creation is inherently a collective process involving multiple roles and competencies, **the cultural sector needs shared spaces of dialogue across its different professions.** For young practitioners: artists, curators, producers, mediators, technicians, having a safe, generationally aligned context in which to reflect together becomes essential.
In this shared space, participants could question not only the structures around them but also their own positioning: What does it mean to be an artist today? *What does it mean to work in contemporary dance in a rural or peripheral context? How do our roles intersect, overlap, or diverge?*

Rather than seeking fixed definitions, these reflections opened pathways to reframe one's practice, one's responsibilities, and one's place within a broader ecosystem. Tools explored during the Atelier, from storytelling models to mapping affinities, offered practical ways to look at one's work from new perspectives and to understand how individual practices sit within a larger landscape of relations and influences.

The Atelier also surfaced deeper structural questions. *How do we define "rural"?* Is a rural context only described through what it lacks (infrastructures, institutions, audiences), or can we start from what is already present: knowledge, relationships, territorial specificity, and forms of resilience? This shift in perspective echoed throughout the discussions on alliances, community engagement, and networks.

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Participants consistently highlighted the value of inhabiting a space where young peers could **think together,** challenge each other, and recognise shared concerns. The balance between workshops, physical practices, facilitated discussions, and informal moments (such as shared meals and the evening performance) was repeatedly described as crucial in shaping a sense of belonging and allowing ideas to deepen organically. Many participants noted that the Atelier offered "a moment to zoom out and go back in again," a chance to reconnect to the motivations and contexts of their work.

From the feedback collected, several themes clearly emerged:

→ **Curation and structure:** the thoughtful design, diversity of formats, rich workshops, and strong flow of activities were widely appreciated.
→ **Environment:** participants valued the welcoming atmosphere, the honesty of exchanges, and the possibility to reflect with peers of the same generation.
→ **Content:** the programme stimulated meaningful reflection on artistic practice, local engagement, and trans-local knowledge.
→ **Organisation:** logistics and hospitality were praised for their clarity and care.

The wishes for the future were equally telling. Participants expressed the desire for **longer opportunities to share and exchange,** more time for in-depth 1-to-1 conversations, clearer tools to translate reflections into practice, and opportunities to work on concrete case studies. Many emphasised the need to meet more often in spaces like this, not just occasionally, but as part of a **continuous, sustained network for young cultural professionals.** Several proposed the creation of a permanent young professionals group to share materials, discuss topics and develop ideas and projects.

This first Atelier dedicated to the young dance artists and curators in rural areas marks an important beginning for EDN's YOUNG stakeholder commission.
Rooting Futures closed not with conclusions, but with commitments: to remain attentive to context, to keep asking difficult questions, to support one another across borders and scales, and to continue building the ecosystems in which the next generation of cultural workers can thrive.

About this Document

This report summarises the EDN Atelier: "Rooting Futures: Young Dance Artists and Curators in Rural Areas", hosted by Oriente Occidente in Rovereto, Italy, on 4–5 November 2025.

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