

## **Review of *b12:research or die*.**

**‘The festival for contemporary dance and performance art in Berlin.’**

***Summer event, July 2022***

**Beth Loughran – University of Cumbria**

*b12: research or die* is a dance festival running yearly in Berlin, Germany, and since 2017 based out of the Eden Studios and Eden Dock 11 performance space. The optimally equipped and cared for studios nestle among a leafy garden area to the back of the main building with hosting facilities and a café; a very hospitable and sociable environment for the international attendees. The original festival main event has usually run in the summer, yet its yearly development and growth means that there have been increasingly additional chances to take part. For example, the *b12* Spring and Autumn iterations are now well established, and online participation has been maintained as an option stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic adaptations. In the case of the summer event, it runs as a series of workshops that organisers term as ‘researches’, with the opportunity for different lengths of experience from around 2-13 days. ‘No leader improves’, morning yoga, talks and performances appear in the programme too, all stemming from the artists, leaders and participants involved, some of these free of charge and others at additional cost.

*Figure 1 Image of general studio scene at b12 Summer 2022 (photo 06 in file name)*

The pricing structure offers variety dependent on the length of the workshop chosen. In addition, there are early bird and regular prices, and a discount that is also given to those with

ten years or more professional experience. For example '4 days / 16 hour workshop time / €190 early bird / €205 regular / €175 ten years of professional experience' (b12.space, 2023). These elements are assessed through the application process that takes interest in each applicant's background, beyond basic personal details. Bundles of workshops that total more than €500 ascending to €900, receive further discounts, and this year's festival (2023) adds a new package that can include on site accommodation, at the Eden Studios.

As a transnational dance festival gaining momentum as a key player on the scene, the festival welcomes teachers, choreographers, professionals and now community-based participants from a range of international locations, not limited to the European continent. Space and cosmos themed language sets an evocative and atmospheric tone in any website or social media communications with event titles like '*asteroid*', '*sun grazer*' and '*deep space*', for example. A climate of care and trust is generated through a very participant and artist centred messaging style enacted, for example, through provision of social events and help with accommodation. A mantra of the festival re-iterated through various online spaces states 'we are you'. (b12.space, 2023/Instagram 2023). Email newsletter, website and social media (including WhatsApp) function very well in providing the chance to refer to past and upcoming events, along with general communication functions around booking or accessing online spaces for example.

This communicative presence is a real strength of the festival and is sustained year-round. For me, this speaks of the founders' and organisers' clear dedication and commitment to its community and its development. Incidentally, this commitment did not waver during the

limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic where activities were run online such as workshops and a 'space invaders' short video competition where all entries were acknowledged.

Sam Coren, Tamara Gvozdenovic, Luke Jessop and Ami Shulman are just a few names contributing to a richly populated line-up of internationally renowned dance and movement practitioners. Festivalgoers can choose to work in either a purely exploratory sense with some 'research' leaders, or in ways that lead to shared performance outputs and opportunities with others. Festival founders and artistic directors Evangelos Poulinas and Johannes Wieland not only create and curate the overall concept along with a brilliant support team, but equally make their own contributions to the programming – Wieland through choreographic performance workshops, and Poulinas through body work workshops and experiences in the 2022 Summer main event (for example, the 2022 choreography performed under the title of *Maybe Tomorrow* [Wieland, 2022], or somatic body work sessions led by Poulinas [these were also continued to be offered online free of charge leading into Autumn 2022].)

In July 2022, I attended a 4-day research with Ami Shulman and a bill of three performances entitled *Asteroids*, choreographed by Coren, Gvozdenovic and Wieland. Shulman's work was the initial draw to the festival for me, having met her in Berlin 2016 at TanzFabrik pre *b12*, as a participant in a series called *Playing with Possibility* (Braude & Shulman in Fraleigh, 2018). For 2022, the research was focused on *Reclaiming the Self*, a welcome idea since my maternity leave year 2019-2020, that led straight into two years of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning various parental, personal and professional development leaps were put on hold or at least warped by time and circumstances. Unlike the workshop series *Playing with Possibility* (Shulman, 2016) that worked firstly in Feldenkrais leading then into to contemporary

dance repertoire practice, the 2022 research was pure in its focus on the Feldenkrais technique alone.

*Figure 2 Image of Ami Shulman teaching at b12 summer 2022 (photo 11 in file name)*

Ami's clever and intriguing handling of embodiment led us to a range of standout knowledge encounters. An example for me was the idea of querying the notion of 'putting ourselves aside' in favour of an ideal: Ami additionally stated that '...an ideal by its very nature is not achievable' (Shulman, 2022). Whilst these directions were specifically expressed to elicit movement, movement quality and sensation, as a dance practitioner and researcher myself, I personally found the provocations simultaneously deeply philosophical as I applied the thinking more widely. In continuation, the emphasis on embodied practice so valued by the very example of the festival, demonstrates a need for these worthwhile capacities and knowledge forms. Allowing movement partners in the space 'to experience succeeding' (Shulman, 2022), was another movement direction that stood out to me, in application to teaching or other ways of working and communicating with others, including caring for them in applied and wider scenarios.

The ticketed performances I attended during my stay were also very thought provoking and transporting in their tackling of social considerations from an embodied and interactive point of view, as is so possible within the paradigm of dance and somatic practice. These processes represent longer versions of the available 'researches' at the festival, spanning around a 13-day process for a limited number of performers, with three separately programmed showings of each piece. *Maybe Tomorrow* by Johannes Wieland, 2022, explored human sensation and social

interaction and perhaps habit and behaviours. *Dim Timbre* by Sam Coren, 2022, focused on the idea of a darker voice we may have, and incorporated additional theatre techniques such as mask, mime and clowning into its creative process. This echoes a key demand of performers as they respond to developing the ability to switch readily between genres, styles and characters. The theme of alternative-lifeforms-on-earth was also cleverly conveyed with a much-needed sense of humour in taking on those darker issues regarding effective connection with the audience. *Unleash the beasts into the negative space* by Tamara Gvozdenovic & Kangding Ray, 2022, of [www.lefacteur.ch](http://www.lefacteur.ch) made for a dramatic exploration of a concept currently inherent to Tamara's approach in self-questioning how the body finds its place in space and what effects can then unfold.

From a planning point of view, I had identified the events possible to attend in advance of arriving and purchased a €16 ticket online once there. On a small sustainability point, reusable counters were issued to online ticket holders upon check-in, which were counted back in upon entry to the performance space. The festival email was very responsive in answering any travel time and venue questions I had at the time.

Overall, this is a very welcoming and well organised festival. I can highly recommend domestic and international travel to this event, made all the easier by the accommodating, thoughtful and expert nature of those running it and those that founded the festival. The opportunities to participate suit longstanding professionals as well as those nearer the beginning of their career or anywhere in between, including non-professionals. I observed students on study abroad programmes using the festival as a learning focus, arguably of invaluable importance currently, when recent years have seen little chance to develop studio-based professional practice.

My experience at *b12: research or die* (2022), felt world-class in quality and I would recommend that it is well worth engaging with, whether on location in Berlin or in your own chosen space through the online options. For dance and somatic movement practitioners, the festival is a great home for an emphasised focus on research, new discovery and innovation, both through the personal experience, and what many experience as the essential collective setting. I would argue that the research, educational, professional and vocational elements of what makes up dance and somatic practice find equal presence in a cosmic blend on *planet B12*. Dancers are ever adapting to diverse planetary conditions in applying their work to many scenarios, and here, the practice is in its element with all the right conditions for dance itself to flourish.

## References

Braude, H. D., Shulman, A. (2018) “‘What if...’: A Question of Transcendence”, in Fraleigh, S. (ed.) *Back to the Dance Itself*, Great Britain, Oxfordshire, University of Illinois Press, pp. 183-204

Collado, C. (2022) *Ami Shulman 06*, b12 research or die festival, Berlin

Collado, C. (2022) *Ami Shulman 11*, b12 research or die festival, Berlin

Coren, S. (2022) *Dim Timbre*, Eden Dock 11, Berlin, 16 July 2022

Gvozdenovic, T. & Kangding, R. (2022) *Unleash the beasts into the negative space*, Eden Dock 11, Berlin, 16 July 2022

Poulinas, E. & Wieland, J. (2023) ‘b12: research or die’, Berlin, <https://b12.space/planet-b12/welcome> & @b12.research.or.die [Instagram]. Accessed 1 May 2023

Shulman, A. (2016) *Playing with Possibility*, TanzFabrik, Berlin

Shulman, A. (2022) *Reclaiming the Self* at b12 research or die, Eden Studios, Berlin

Wieland, J. (2022) *Maybe Tomorrow*, Eden Dock 11, Berlin, 16 July 2022

