

## Pause for thought

To celebrate the refocusing of the EMDASH Foundation's annual art prize towards performance art, they commissioned Nástio Mosquito to make a new work for the ICA. Ric Bower and Francesca Donovan spoke to EMDASH's founder, Andrea Dibelius, as they sat awaiting Mosquito's prophecies.

Commissioning ephemeral works which cannot be hung on the walls of global institutions, or sold to dealerships and collectors, is a bold statement against the ongoing commodification of creative practice. CCQ asked Andrea Dibelius, the founder of EMDASH, why she has made a conscious effort to invest in an aspect of human endeavour that, some might say, has no practical purpose.

**Andrea Dibelius:** We do so much digitally: we write emails, we text, even our love letters are on Whatsapp. When does somebody have the opportunity to really communicate their thoughts, criticisms and questions to the world? The answer, I believe, is through performance. Performance art is by no means new, but it is certainly evolving through the application of multimedia. And it needs support from foundations like ours now precisely because it's not commodifiable.

**CCQ:** Do you see performance drawing on a pre-modern tradition?

**AD:** Everything that we reinvent always relates to something else that came before it. An emdash is a pause that allows you to reflect on your prior thoughts and to interject something new. In fashion, in thought, in speech and, of course, in art, there is always a precursor.

**CCQ:** Do you always encourage artists to take stock and then strike out in a new direction?

**AD:** Artists wouldn't be artists if they were not producing what was innate to them, but they each have their own processes. Artists have different phases in their lives that inspire change, so development in their practices happens organically. We don't need to encourage it – it's automatic.

**CCQ:** Performance is difficult to represent. How can the event be communicated authentically after the fact?

**AD:** Your question implies another: how do you collect performance art? And, honestly, I don't know. We have made sure, of course, that we have four cameras to capture Nástio's performance tonight. Someone like Nástio, who possesses this incredible charisma and presence, can still communicate through the medium of video. Having said that, seeing coverage on YouTube will be different to experiencing Nástio live. When you engage with Nástio, he engages with you, and the performance goes in a different direction. The Age I Don't Remember, if he repeated it, would be totally different. Performance art, as a form, should not be recycled. It always has to be fresh. We just have to encourage more performances if we want to create these live moments. Everybody is talking about buying the rights to performative works. I think that's wrong. Performance should be in the moment, otherwise it loses power.

**CCQ:** EMDASH has supported work that comments on the commercial nature of the art world. What role can performance, uniquely perhaps, play in the art world's attempts at self-criticism?

**AD:** It is inherently non-commercial and so it already stands outside the system. It's hard to collect. It's hard to hang on your wall. You could buy a still from a performance, but it would never represent what you have actually experienced.

**CCQ:** Without obvious monetary connections or opportunities open to a performance artist, what other options are there out there?

**AD:** There are a lot of art foundations that can jump in and support performance artists who don't have contacts with curators or collectors. Critics say that foundations are often just vanity projects. Some of them are, maybe, but at the same time, foundations that support the right projects for the right reasons can do a lot of good.



**CCQ:** Foundations often have the power to dictate the kind of work that is commissioned and exhibited. They become not only the financiers but also the arbiters of taste. Surely, that is counter-productive?

**AD:** You could argue the same of curators! In a way, foundations are purer. You can think outside the box with a foundation, because you don't need to be recognised, or build yourself a career as a successful curator. You're not tied down by professional pressures put on you by institutions. When commissioning work, the EMDASH foundation always collaborates both with the artist and with a separate institution or museum.

**CCQ:** It's about networks rather than individuals, then?

**AD:** I think a network consists of different individuals whose roles are changing over time. It's not set in stone. Globally, the art community is large. There is no need to work with the same people over and over. I try to work with people who are not yet in my network, to give artists a chance to reach out into that broader community, both personally and geographically.

**CCQ:** The Medici family had a very direct input into the intellectual and creative environment they fostered. Do you see that kind of input as part of your responsibility as a foundation?

**AD:** Well, that would be a high objective! I work more simply. EMDASH just wants to make people think and, through thinking, one can hopefully implement change for the better. If someone leaves Nástio's event tonight having enjoyed the music and goes home happy, I think I have done my job and Nástio has done his job too. If somebody goes home tonight having formulated an interest in performance art, that's great too! If somebody goes home tonight and thinks of the problems in this world, especially in Angola, and then starts supporting a charity, even better still. Happiness, personal development, political changes; that's enough for me. I don't aim as high as the Medici.

Both pages: *The Age I Don't Remember*, Nástio Mosquito, ICA, 2015. Performance documentation: Gáston van Mülders for CCQ.



**CCQ:** What then is the difference between art and an information leaflet, as a vehicle to initiate change?

**AD:** In the case of Nástio, he draws you in. Immersion is the key. There is a German word: *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It means, 'a total, universal work of art that touches all your senses'. This is what art can do that a leaflet cannot.

**CCQ:** What about the current cultural climate makes commissioning ephemeral work particularly important now?

**AD:** Public museums and institutions in Europe are having to cut budgets. It is always the right time to commission ephemeral work, but especially now; foundations like us need to collaborate with artists and stopgap this lack of public funding. It's practical factors, above all, that make it particularly important to commission work now.

**CCQ:** Do you have particular geographical aspirations? Where do you want EMDASH to be working?

**AD:** The art world is international. Artists should think and act and work on a global basis. EMDASH looks for good artists and emerging artists at an interesting point in their career, no matter where they come from. We have no geographical restrictions or aspirations in that respect. But even as a global oriented thinker, I cannot deny my own roots. I'm Austrian. I perceive things in an Austrian way. When I am in Angola, there is an Austrian girl inside me influencing the way I think. That is unavoidable.

**CCQ:** Nástio's approach to communication is particularly non-Western. Have you noticed marked variations in the process of artistic development between, say, the West and Africa?

**AD:** You think that has something to do with where an artist comes from? I think it's a question of the person rather than their nationality. I've seen artists that work the way Nástio works, but I've seen artists who are more regimented too; they wake up at 8am, have their lunch at noon each day, walk with their dog, then go back to the studio until 5pm. My drive to engage with artists – wherever they're from – comes from my fascination with their divergent modes of communication. It's never linear.

**CCQ:** EMDASH may be seeking to disseminate work to a wider audience but the artworld is intellectually exclusive is it not? How might EMDASH break that down those barriers?

**AD:** Artists break them down themselves. Somebody like Nástio is more than an artist, in the traditional sense. He's an entertainer and a musician as well. I think music is easy for everybody to hold onto so the blurred boundaries between disciplines themselves can facilitate the process of dissemination.

**CCQ:** Tell us about the EMDASH award.

**AD:** Every project EMDASH has supported so far has had a performative element. It became clear to us that we should redirect the award towards performance exclusively; not only because there is no performance award in Europe at present and because the artform suffers from a severe lack of funding, but also because the discipline is crucially important in its own right—**CCQ**

*Nástio Mosquito performed The Age I Don't Remember at the ICA, London in November 2015, commissioned by The EMDASH Foundation.*  
[emdash.net](http://emdash.net)  
[ica.org.uk](http://ica.org.uk)  
[nastiosmosquito.com](http://nastiosmosquito.com)