

**Marjan Dewulf**

## **CON-FRONT: THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST**

“Imagining war is the curse of our violent world; we have no choice but to face that task with as much intelligence, compassion, and courage as we can”  
Jay Winter.

*CON-FRONT is an international and multidisciplinary project on the cultural commemoration of the Great War. The project is supported in the Creative Europe programme within the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018.*

*CON-FRONT aims to create awareness on the common European legacy of the Great War (1914–1918). Through this objective, the project tests a new form of commemoration, accumulating on the expertise of contemporary music venues and heritage organisations. The partnership spreads from Belgium, France, Slovenia to North Macedonia.*

*The project's most visible result is a cross-border multidisciplinary creation of a group of young international pop and rock musicians and visual artists, produced through five residencies. The creation will be performed in the fall of 2019 in the four countries and beyond. Parallel to this, a documentary focuses on the pan-European historical context of the First World War besides capturing the CON-FRONT creation process and its outcome.*

### **Partnership**

*The CON-FRONT partnership is unique and diverse in its constitution: two music venues (Le Grand Mix in Tourcoing, France and 4AD Music Club in Diksmuide, Belgium), one cultural centre and venue (MKC in Skopje, North Macedonia) and one heritage partner (Walk of Peace Foundation in Kobarid, Slovenia). Geographically, the partnership crystallised along the continental frontline as it winds from the Belgian coast to the Southeast of Europe.*

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*The CON-FRONT partners are backed by a wide range of cultural, educational and heritage partners on their territories. These supporting partners play diverse but important roles: from sharing knowledge on the historical topics, through artistic and technical support as well as providing assistance on the development of the project's educational activities.*

## **Cultural Commemoration**

Over these past years, numerous World War I commemoration events have been organised all over Europe. Some were military or ceremonial, others cultural and participatory. These events, some with large international exposure, have certainly proven their value but largely focused on national and military history. There is still very little awareness on the totality of the World War I and its impact in the whole of Europe.

Cultural commemoration of the World War I, where local cultural partners cooperate with local government bodies and heritage partners, is not novel in Europe. However, as explained previously, few of these collaborations have surmounted their own national historical contexts.

Technically, the centenary commemoration of the World War I ended on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2018, but its legacy will continue to draw hundreds of thousands of people to its landmarks, museums and monuments. The commemoration of this event will remain a part of the European future. However, as historian and cultural commemoration expert Jay Winter warned, it is a difficult task to honour those who die in wars without honouring war itself. This careful balance is indeed one of the most important challenges for the future.

## **Different Angles**

Besides the distinctiveness of the CON-FRONT partnership, the choice to work with young contemporary musicians (pop, rock, hip hop, dance, and so on) and visual artists is different from the cultural commemoration canon. Commemoration of the World War I through music was mainly the domain of the classical music sector (chorals and orchestras reinterpreting classical war-related oeuvres). Some of the performances (such as within GoneWest, the centennial programme of the Flemish Province of West-Flanders) proved

that contemporary music could also be a powerful vehicle for cultural commemoration, drawing a new and younger international audience.<sup>1</sup>

CON-FRONT leaves these well-trodden paths by letting young contemporary European artists reside on three of Europe's World War I fronts, excavating a history they know little about. The consortium reflects the international character of a war that affected many nations and its citizens.

### **Historical Background**

World War I was the first military conflict in human history on a global scale. Its outcome defined the landscape, economy, identity and demographics of continental Europe. The historical frontline went from the North Sea, over the Balkans to the Gallipoli archipelago and connects all Europeans in a single symbolical line.

World War I also uprooted millions of European civilians, most of whom were innocent bystanders, creating the first ever major European refugee crisis. The massive migration of people all over Europe a hundred years ago and the impact of these war refugees on Europe's history is an aspect that has not reached a broad public. War migration has repeated itself continuously on European soil these last hundred years: during World War II, the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s and even now with the current war in Syria, refugee flow all over Europe. In order to keep the memory of World War I alive in all of its complexity, citizens need to awaken their human capacity for empathy while maintaining an accurate historical perspective. A better comprehension of the past is important to understand the present.

### **Past**

In the summer of 2018, each partner selected two individual national artists for the ensemble: one contemporary musician (pop, rock, hip hop, jazz, dance, and so on) and one visual artist. Parallel to this, the partners designated an artistic director and a director for the documentary.

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1 *Einstürzende Neubauten's* composition *Lament* (2014) was commissioned by the West Flemish government as part of the GoneWest programme. The band turned it into a critically acclaimed album. Likewise, John Cale (2014), Daniel Lanois (2015), The Veils (2015), Gurrumul (2015) and Godspeed You! Black Emperor (2017) made new compositions for the GoneWest program, each of them linked to a historical event on the Belgian stretch of the Western Front.

From October 2018 onwards, each of the four partners prepared and hosted a 5-day residency in its city or greater area. The first CON-FRONT residency took place in Diksmuide, right at the heart of the historical World War I front better known as Flanders Fields. Muziekclub 4AD hosted the team in its professional venue and rehearsal spaces as well as its onsite artist accommodation. During this first residency, the focus was on the historical events along this illustrious stretch of frontline. Special attention went to civilian experiences, the altered and bruised landscapes and 'lieux de mémoire' or 'places of memory'. The In Flanders Fields Museum Research Centre helped prepare the historical input.

During the second residency in November, the artists worked in the inspiring setting of the MinK club in Tolmin (Slovenia), ideally located on the historical Isonzo front. Kobarid-based Walk of Peace foundation hosted this residency. Various excursions took place in the beautiful and pristine Soča valley, where the stunning landscape was once the sad theatre of the heaviest and bloodiest combats along the European frontline. Walk of Peace, together with the Goriški Muzej in Nova Gorica, prepared the content for this residency.

In February 2019, the team headed to Skopje (North Macedonia) for a third residency. The artists worked on the audio-visual creation in the premises of project partner MKC. The creative work was alternated by inspiring excursions to the World War I heritage sites in Skopje and on the historical Salonika Front. Furthermore, the artists also plunged into some recent stories of displacement through war in the Balkans and the current refugee flows.

## **Future**

Mid-April 2019, the CON-FRONT team will head to Tourcoing (France) for a fourth residency on another stretch of the Western front. A fifth and final residency in June in Diksmuide (BE) is dedicated to finalise the creation and prepare all technical aspects for the tour in the fall of 2019.

In October and November 2019, the creation will tour through France, Belgium, Slovenia, North Macedonia and, additionally, Italy and Serbia. The CON-FRONT creation will be staged in the partner's or supporting partner's venues. At least five extra dates are added within the project partner's national and transnational network.

The creation will also be staged to secondary school students (16–18 years) and young recognised refugees in matinee performances. Guided exchange

and dialogue between the two groups is also part of this educational trajectory. Additionally, these encounters will be coached by the Remembrance Team of the Province of West-Flanders (BE).

The documentary will be the aftermath and is meant to be a long-term and sustainable means of keeping the project and its values alive through different international broadcasting possibilities. The project's last action is a jointly-written methodology available online based on the experiences and results.

Neither the totality of the World War I nor the displacement in its wake are a strong part of our collective European memory. One of CON-FRONT's main ambitions is to look for alternative ways of cultural commemoration and create better awareness of these common themes. Imagination and suggestion are key words in this artistic approach. Collective memory and identity materialise throughout the process, which is backed by solid historical facts. Artistic experience can serve as a transformative and mind-blowing exploration of a shared history or theme, without trivialising, dehumanising or even glorifying it and can be a powerful and convincing medium.

*More info on the project and the selected artists on [www.con-front.eu](http://www.con-front.eu).*