

A black and white photograph of a modern building interior, possibly a lobby or hallway. The scene is dimly lit, with a bright light source illuminating a path where three people are walking away from the camera. A large, thick, purple brushstroke graphic is overlaid on the image, starting from the left and curving around the text. The text 'hidden research' is written in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font, with 'hidden' on the top line and 'research' on the bottom line. The background shows architectural details like a wall and a small plant.

hidden research

A Theatre
Project



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about hidden research

hidden research brings to life the stories and conflicts surrounding academic freedom, as told by endangered and exiled scholars from around the world. The Berlin Center for Global Engagement of the Berlin University Alliance (BUA) coordinates the project in close collaboration with the BUA-funded network initiative co²libri - Conceptual Collaboration. Living Borderless Research Interaction and with the art director Aldo Spahiu.

Hidden research offers a unique opportunity to connect audiences with the deeply personal and often anonymous experiences of scholars at risk - by bringing their stories as performances to the stage.

The basis of the project are in-depth interviews with researchers that experienced hindrances and obstacles to academic freedom during their career. Actors perform theatrical dialogues around key themes drawn from these interviews, 'making the researchers' voices heard and bringing their struggles again to the public limelight.

The Berlin Center for Global Engagement (BCGE), coordinating this project, serves as the platform of the Berlin University Alliance (BUA) for promoting research collaboration with the "Global South" — referring to countries that occupy a marginalized position in global science production — as well as advancing academic freedom and fostering science diplomacy. The BCGE plays a key role in connecting diverse (inter-)disciplinary, regional and country-specific expertises, necessary for global scientific cooperation and contributing to the creation of a more equitable and safe global research landscape.

The project is carried out in close collaboration with the BUA-funded project co²libri (*Conceptual Collaboration - Living Borderless Research Interaction*). Co²libri is a global network of researchers, artists, and activists dedicated to rethink Global North-South research collaborations for a more decentered, inclusive and decolonial understanding of knowledge production and exchange. Co2libri aims to contribute to an alternative practice of theorizing, research methods and research ethics.



performance

“taking sides”



facing controversies

The *hidden research performance* “taking sides” delves into challenges faced by scientists and their international cooperation partners who stand up against powerful hierarchies and hegemonic discourses. In the midst of preparing an academic conference, a student team member experiences at first hand restrictive boundaries, anxieties and lack of solidarity imposed on scholars at risk through the reactions and choices of their fellow researchers and the international cooperation partners.

become aware

In a moment of revelation, the student assisting the conference team questions these choices and begins to grasp their far-reaching implications not only for the scholar at risk but also for the wider academic community as well as one’s own

society. Encountering a scholar at risk, the student gains insights into the realities faced by those deprived of academic freedom and conducting critical research. What does it mean to publish under a pseudonym? What does it mean to miss recognition for one’s work? What does it mean to be hidden and isolated from wider academic networks and exchange for who one is and for what one stands for?

inner strength

The scene depicts a profound struggle and inner transformation, illustrating the need for academic solidarity and the potential of mutual support networks – even for those without institutional power.



“taking sides”, 15 min.

- **direction, dramaturgy:** Aldo Spahiu
- **actors:** Constantin Gerhards (student team member), Sanni Blodt (scholar at risk)
- **music:** Paolo Possidente
- **costumes:** Fabrizio Pompei

performance

“the routine”

daily risks

The performance “the routine” portrays the daily risks faced by researchers working within oppressive systems that suppress academic freedom. It reveals the subtle and overt strategies they develop to resist these constraints.

no choice but resistance

In this performance, a young female researcher strives to pursue her own research interests within a system hostile to academic autonomy and critical thinking. Warned by a colleague about the potential dangers, she initially hesitates but ultimately summons her courage to defy the system—knowing that silence is simply not an option for her.

hidden in exile

Even after fleeing to a new country, she continues to struggle for recognition, coming to understand that the suppression of academic freedom is a global issue. Though still at risk, she frees herself from self-censorship and becomes an inspiring role model for her peers, embodying resilience and the courage to speak out.

“the routine”, 15 min.

- **direction, dramaturgy:** Aldo Spahiu
- **actors:** Luise Grell (scholar at risk), Meltem Teper (colleague)
- **music:** Paolo Possidente
- **costumes:** Fabrizio Pompei



co-producing performances

The production of theatrical performances within the *hidden research* project is a profoundly collaborative and ethically engaged process, uniting theater artists, scholars at risk, MA students from research ethics classes, activists, science managers and other experts on academic freedom. This diverse team works together to create scripts and scenes that authentically capture the complex realities faced by researchers, while ensuring an ethically responsible portrayal of their stories.

The process begins with in-depth interview conversations, where scholars at risk share their personal experiences, struggles and their resilience to the threats and contestations faced due to their scientific work. These interviews are then carefully transformed into stage dialogues through a collaborative and iterative feedback process. Each stage of this adaptation is informed by a critical ethics of care, thus a strong sense of responsibility, solidarity, joint reflexivity and respect. This means to avoid any harm through "othering", stereotyping or sensationalising.

Theatre artists bring storytelling expertise, shaping the scenes into compelling narratives, while researchers lend their insights to ensure that the content remains both factual and ethically grounded. MA students from research ethics classes at the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Humboldt-Universität of Berlin add further perspectives. They receive practical training and capacity-building. These early career researchers support the team to ensure an ethical approach throughout and to unpack the deeper implications of each testimony put on stage.

Fellow researchers and scholar activists along with science managers and experts on academic freedom provide additional input, connecting these personal accounts to larger systemic, structural and geopolitical questions. This reinforces not only our responsibility to portray these stories accurately and respectfully but also link them for a wider public to globally pressing sociopolitical debates and implications of science at risk.

- **project manager:** Dr. Sarah Wessel , BCGE, BUA
- **artistic director:** Aldo Spahiu
- **scientific consultant:** PD Dr. Andrea Fleschenberg dos Ramos Pinéu, HU/IAAW
- **coordination/PR:** Maria Elisa Silva de Almeida, SCRIPTS/FU
- **Early Career Researcher team:** Jennifer Aghedo, Greta Blaß, Angelina Demetry, Wanja Firnkes, Ivy Kussmaul, Katharina Lang, Amanda Pridmore, Hester Quanshah, Carmin Rios Fukelman, Bhavya Sinha, Phili Stoeveken, Mateullah Tareen, Lena Wassermeier, Zuzana Vargova





public discussions

Hidden research combines performances with public talks featuring experts on academic freedom and research ethics from around the world. Those events aim to connect diverse audiences and the wider public to academic debates, understandings and struggles. Using theatre is key to join often disconnected arenas and spaces, to "move" people and raise awareness.



science communication

With the support of artists and theater experts, this project elevates science communication to a new level. *Hidden Research* experiments with various closed and public performance settings, discovering what it takes to engage a broader audience in safe and ethical ways when working on challenges of scholar(ship) at risk.



transdisciplinarity

The projects develops transdisciplinarity between researchers, students and artists. This includes outreach practices, research ethics training, and storywriting skills. Moreover, it generates a space of contact and joint learning with exiled scholars at risk – fellow researchers, who require a space for reflection, care along with safe and sustainable infrastructures for support and collaboration.

behind the scenes



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