



### Speech by Inge Ceustermans

General Director The Festival Academy

### Opening Ceremony Atelier for Young Festival Managers NEXT 2019

13 November, Lille, France

Dear Participants, mentors, partners and guests,

It's quite a humbling experience to stand here before you. I always feel this at the beginning of an Atelier. To finally stand here and see all of you, 35 festival managers from 25 countries and all continents, whose applications you have screened, who you co-fundraised with, answered questions and read your projects in preparation of the Atelier. Some of you applied possibly for one of the earlier ateliers even, only to take part today. Welcome to all of you.

I would like to sincerely thank our partner, International Arts Festival NEXT, a cross border festival between Belgium and France with its partners La Rose Des Vents Villeneuve d'Ascq, Schouwburg Kortrijk, le Phénix Valenciennes, Maison de la Culture Tournai, Espace Pasolini Valenciennes, Art Centre Buda Kortrijk and Benoit Geers, coordinator of this festival, who himself participated in the Edinburgh 2014 Atelier. This is for The Festival Academy of course a gift that alumni think it's worthwhile to organize this programme within their context and festivals. It also immediately gives you an example of how you can use the platforms you have to create opportunities for future festival leaders to take part in this programme.

We are delighted to have with us the mentors Airan Berg, Ong Keng Sen, Erica McCalman, Brett Pyper, Danny Yung and guest speakers and observers. I also would like to introduce Mike Van Graan who has been developing this programme and others with us the past 2 years, and who generally co-developed the mission and vision of The Festival Academy. He will also facilitate the 7 days. Many thanks to Laure, Valentina, HuiYu and Karlijn, who have prepared this edition together with me.

I would like to mention and thank all the partners who supported this Atelier and made it possible as Creative Europe, the Flemish Community, La Région Hauts-de-France, Eurometropole Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai + Valenciennes, Interreg, the City of Kortrijk. Also thanks to HOWEST and the Students Devine who will research this week the possibilities of new technologies related to festivals and art which they will present to us.

Such talent and experience that gathers here today for some hardcore thinking, reflecting in the next seven days on festivals and their role in the world today and also on concrete actions we can take from these conversations. The seven days is only a beginning, what will happen after is essential.

It has been quite a journey the last few years in developing The Festival Academy with its own image, vision, mission towards and independent organization. In 5 days we celebrate our 7<sup>th</sup> birthday, 2 years younger than my youngest son. The Atelier, this programme out of which The Academy grew, is 13 years old, 2 years older than my oldest son. We are growing up. With all the obstacles that come with growth: the belief in what you do, advocating for it, self-doubt at times, limited resources, long working hours, pressure on the verge of burnout, facing one's own limitations, colleagues who are getting tired, needing to step back to keep on seeing the bigger picture, priorities, what is truly important, keeping everyone motivated and to practice what you preach, and to allow for mistakes, humanity and vulnerability. It asks for courage and effort to take the road less traveled and to move into challenged areas at times and to create access for people from these regions.

At the same time, it is important to look back to see what has evolved and has already been realized so far and to be proud of that and satisfied. It takes time and effort to build things; while it is so easy to destroy things in a very short period which is often frustrating.

The results of where we are with The Festival Academy today is a collective effort, of people who believe in the mission of this organization, of people on all levels, be it collaborators, ambassadors, partners, interns, high level people, European Commission people, foundations worldwide etc. People who share a belief that something like this is needed, that there is an urgency for it even, given the number of partners who want to organize the activities with us and the participants applying, as well as the similar initiatives that pop up here and there as for example the Young Curators Academy of our colleague Ong Keng Sen who I had the privilege to attend in Berlin just recently for a couple of days and which you should all get acquainted with in next days I believe.

Today and after 15 Ateliers, 4 production managers training, tailor made programmes, Festival Readings, alumni meetings; we are a community, of in the first place people: 650 festival managers from 80+ countries and all continents. They act as ambassadors and partners for The Festival Academy, they take part as mentors and guest speakers and they collaborate with each other and started new initiatives. They all have platforms which reach out to people and civil society in their audiences, communities, stakeholders from which they can respond to issues of today. We are also a network of about 80 high level experts from festivals coming from all over the world and also from other fields of actions.

Add to this a network of arts councils, foundations, cultural institutes who support participants and activities. To name a few with who we work structurally towards more inclusivity as the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, our colleagues in Beirut who are currently with the cultural sector on an open strike joining the uprising taking place against the current system of power, Arts Council Korea, ICORN and others. Creative Europe has been supporting us for some years now as a synergy partner in the network grant of the European Festivals Association, our initiator.

And now for the first time with a grant for The Festival Academy for a 21 months' cooperation project 'ACT for global change' of which the kick off meeting is taking place as part of the Atelier and whose partners you will be able to meet here as well. It is thanks to this sustainable network we have built step by step with The Festival Academy and of course thanks to the ongoing support of our initiator the European Festivals Association, that we have been able to deliver high level quality and to continue this programme on a regular basis with still very limited resources and a lot of investment of people.

It is an example of the force of a collective, how you inspire each other, encourage each other, motivate each other, to arrive at something you would never have been able to imagine or do on your own.

I would like to thank everyone who is here today.

What we are building is a diverse eco system that does a lot with lots of passion and a very small but engaged team surrounded by many friends.

And this eco system, to diversify your partnerships, is as essential as ever and it is still scarily fragile in the arts. Through history we see tides coming in and out and the climate towards the art is not always very friendly as we witness in many parts of the world today. Education, Research and Culture are being targeted by leaders and governments who actively try to prevent critical thinking citizens and freedom of expressing and alternative visions of society and living.

We cannot take anything for granted, neither the support for the arts.

This results often in decreases of government support for the arts. In Flanders the new right wing government where the minister of Flanders took also the portfolio of culture, stating this is a priority for them, has just now decided that the long term subventions will be cut with 3 to 6 percent. Project subventions (which we received support under) will be cut with 60%. These subventions are essential for new creations, for influx of new artists, for experiment, for a diverse eco system that keeps the arts alive. If you cut the roots, you will eventually hurt the top. It reaches also those most fragile in the cultural field – the artists and people working in it. They will invest more in cultural heritage and the film industry to strengthen the Flemish identity. Flemish identity, please explain me what that is. Fries and beer?

There seems to be a rising schism between what 'Culture' means which governments, cities in a utilitarian approach use to create (segregate?) groups in society related to identity and on the other side 'Arts', marginalized by those governments as the independent leftists' arts, which continually challenges the concept of identity and status quo. Something to reflect about.

On a European level the national policies are reflected and also there the trend seems funding will go down although the previous European parliament advocated for the opposite. EU Commission President, Ursula Von der Leyen, in her State of the Union Speech with all Presidents of the EU's institutions present at the Brandenburg Gate on the eve of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall hardly mentioned culture.

The European Festivals Association is launching a festivals cities initiative to create new alliances and to work on a concrete agenda and suggestions on how the cultural potential of cities can be strengthened and invested for Europe and the world, to go beyond nation states.

We need to stay flexible and resilient to move with the tide. Or go against it at times

So we are becoming seven, what have we grown into? An open space for people, at a time when freedom of movement becomes more and more challenging once again, to talk about what cannot be talked about. We have been working hard to become more inclusive, the work is continuous and challenging, and goes with ups and downs. We aim to create links between festival managers coming from very different backgrounds geographically, culturally, socially, generationally, from different art disciplines. To create out of the box encounters. To move away from who we know, to move out of our regular networks, to look for those whose voices are underrepresented, there is still a lot of work to be done.

The next steps with this Atelier is to connect festivals to different fields of actions as philanthropy, education, social movements, new technologies experts etc. To be able to get inspired by each other, but also to see where joint actions can be taken based on personal connections and, awareness and knowledge of each other and each other's contexts. All of this guided by experts and main influencers and people who have the capacity to also put money towards it and people with political influence to advocate for changes in the frameworks needed to build our work.

We gather and build knowledge from the field, from people actually working in festivals, facing obstacles every day. We share this information also to a broader community, to policy makers, foundations and others to change the world collectively and structurally instead of on an individual basis. And to allow for new ideas and new initiatives to develop from this soil.

An open space what does that mean? Is it a safe space? We talk a lot about 'safe' spaces today. However, who sets the standard of what is safe for someone else? I wouldn't want to claim the Atelier is per se a safe space. From many reactions of participants at the end of the 7 days, the beginning of the Atelier was rather a challenging moment, they did not feel at home, they did not like the food, they did not recognize the smell and felt utterly lost actually. If you read the words behind my back which are echoes of earlier Ateliers, it gives you an impression of the grey zone you have entered. The complexity of human connection, of a world where although put forward by many today as if there are simple solutions, is not black and white.

We will co-create this open, safe space together with you. An open space to have dangerous conversations. A facilitated dialogue around difficult topics. Which shares access to knowledge, facts, information and different perspectives about the world where we dare to address complexity.

A space in which by making the effort to find, feel, see what connect us rather than what divides us, I believe we can have a positive effect on our world and living in it.

A space to agree to disagree, where English will be the common language though the majority does not have this at its mother's tongue. Creating openness by respecting each other, each other's differences, limitations, by being curious enough to wanting to really understand even if only a tip of the context someone else is operating in, being open, daring to be fragile and to share.

It will ask for an effort. It will ask for listening, it will ask for sincere curiosity in the other, for imagining stepping in someone else shoes, for holding back at times, for keeping space, for being courageous. It will ask for letting go and abandoning of what you think you know, and allowing for new insights to form you and others. It will ask for allowing mistakes, for patience and for being gentle with oneself and others.

I invite us all to step out of our comfort zones in the coming days. To move out of our comfort zones also on the level of power we decide to share with one another. Being in a position of decision maker whether it be on the level of curation, funder, expert; who can be part of your team, who can access your activities, who has access to the money you can allocate, and the way in which you share knowledge and expertise with others so they feel empowered rather than weakened, in sharing also what did not work, went wrong, was shameful even.

In all this what we do and love, we also strive to keep this space as open as possible. Be it a space where people may believe festivals are for art's sake, a space for activists, a space for woman and men, for transgender people, for LGTB people, for people of different colours and tastes.

To not limit ourselves to one thing, one trend, one urgency, but to many. A space curated to the specific group of people present here today and its sensitivities.

A space to fight for artistic freedom, to express oneself in multiple ways which goes beyond freedom of expression. We are working in this field also because we believe artists can show us something about the world, not necessarily through rational thinking, not through the market, but through our heart and belly. Which can speak to many, which can make us feel part of a bigger whole. To make sense out of nonsense. To be able to live, thanks to the beauty that pushes back ugly ideas.

Art is political, but art is not politics. There are people for that, who are paid a lot of money and who should be held accountable if they screw up. Art, artists should not carry the burden of the world. It need to be free, it can reflect, it can criticise, it can mobilise the squares and the streets, it can open eyes, it educates, it shows beauty, values, it cares, it teaches compassion.

We believe festivals are meeting places for people and bridging platforms with a direct link to civil society, a term I recently learned we cannot use in Hong Kong. How can we respond from these platforms today to what is going on around us, in Hong Kong, Brazil, Turkey, US, Europe, Australia, Africa to name only a few of the countries present here today. Festivals don't exist in a vacuum and when culture and arts and rights of expression and movement are targeted in a certain region, this affects the whole cultural scene and society as a whole. How can we get organized to keep advocating for the importance of art, culture, education on the political agenda? How can we respond to governments who are accountable to their citizens and don't safeguard essential human rights? How can we use our platforms to advocate for human rights, for freedom of speech, movement not for a few but for all?

Art mirrors our world at times, it also allows for imagining different realities.

What I'm interested in and am curious about is to see how from festivals and together with organisations who strive for democracy and democratic values like the African Cultural Policy Network, Open Society Foundations, European Cultural Foundation, Drosos, Cena Aberta, Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, Young Curators Academy, universities and education programmes, ICORN and others, how we can act together from civil society in a joint effort. How we can strengthen each other's initiatives and what we can create from a joint public space. It is thanks to the work of so many artists, festivals, foundations as present here today that things have already changed, that situations are looking up, that life's of people have been improved. How can we contribute to that?

Festivals as safe spaces, as shields behind which a lot can happen, as spaces for belonging, as spaces for caring for one another, as spaces for democracy and social change.

How can we respond to injustice from these platforms? Like for example the injustice that one of our participants is not here today? Mohamed Harb, Citizen of Palestine whose participation was supported by our partner the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture. The reason he was rejected is an example of social and economic racism from our Belgium government. He paid 250€ for his application.

This is what Mohamed Harb had to say in response to the rejection:

**Dear friends at the Atelier for Young Festival Managers and friends in AFAC,**

It's a pity to hear that  
It is unfortunate that we take a simple dose of hope in our lives  
Our miserable lives here in Palestine - Gaza  
That don't even allow us to breathe outside the prison that claims Gaza  
I also apologize for everything  
I appreciate and understand that there is not enough time to re-apply  
I will try to apply again to share with you in May  
Perhaps be luckier this time  
I will be with you moment by moment at the Atelier  
I will give all my participation, video and worksheet  
Thank you for allowing my name to remain in the Atelier  
And thank you for the life that allows us to breathe again

**Mohamed Harb**

From the Great Gaza Prison

A single dose of hope...

Who are the gatekeepers? In this neo liberal and capitalist society where anything can be bought? So what if you don't have access to these kind of resources?

The question is also 'Are we gatekeepers?'. Where are the glass ceilings in our festivals? Whose stories are not being told? Who has access to your festivals not only in terms of audiences, communities, artists but also on the level of your team, co-workers. Who is working on the management and who is cleaning your offices?

Why has a 16-year-old girl the heavy task of advocating for climate change and is being bullied for it even? Why do her alter ego's in less resourced regions, who are advocating for the same cause directly affected by it, why do their names not even sound familiar to us? For a cause of such scale and importance.

Why is it that researchers, intellectuals, scientists, journalists have lost credibility and legitimacy in the political debate?

And what are the root causes related to this? Could we imagine a society which is not based on your economic value but on your human value which is universal, right?

If we apply market mechanisms to climate change, how will those least responsible pay the price in countries where climate change impact hardest through floods, water shortage and struggle for resources.

Who decides what belongs to who? And isn't it time to give back what has been taken illegitimately?

Is one human life worth more than another?

What are we prepared to share? How much power are we prepared to share?

How violent can our language be? Why are we talking today about a refugee crisis in Europe if actual figures don't show a crisis situation and what we need is a more liberal and humane migration policy

We need to look at the figures and facts.

We need to ask questions continuously. What once worked, might not work today.

We need to always remain critical and not just accept the way things are or what is being said.

We need to take risks.

We need to risk failure.

We need to doubt ourselves continuously.

We need to be convinced continuously.

We need to be self-critical.

We need to be self-accepting.

When political courage is lacking, when economic systems are failing, when nature does not care about all this and goes its way, when a few feast and those south pay the price, we need to resist.

We need to resist to be divided.

We need courage.

We need each other.

We need to care.

We need more compassion.

We need to build a stronger eco system.

After these 7 days you will have a new group of friends from places you might never have been before, you will have learned about their festivals, aspects of their culture, political regime, good governance models or the opposite. We need to ask ourselves how we can use our platforms to help people, give space to different voices and what we can do to contribute to more open societies

I would like to quote George Soros, founder of the Open Society Foundations, answering in his recent interview by the Guardian to the question 'could the world be heading to a truly dark place?':

*'We certainly can't exclude it. But that depends on all of us. We can't passively wait for things to go right. We have to act on our principles even when the situation appears hopeless.'*

There is enough future for all of us, there is no future for one.

I invite you all into it now.

Thank you. And thanks again to all the those I named in the beginning;

Inge Ceustermans 13/11/2019