

Online Training #3: Curating Festivals

Curating Festivals – Opening statement Inge Ceustermans, General Director The Festival Academy

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In the past weeks I have been part of quite some discussions on festivals, for one at the Salzburg Global Seminar talking about the future of festivals, in the STAND Foundation Seminar on the question whether festivals are still relevant today and in a panel conversation on the occasion of the International Day for Tolerance, about how artists and or festivals can contribute to peace-building as well as an alumni session on re-thinking and re-imagining how we programme.

What in all these sessions came forward is the changing perspectives of the role of festivals in today's societies. As our societies are in need of change on so many levels, which COVID 19 has highlighted even more, festivals are shifting as well.

Eckhard Thiemann (Artistic Director and CEO of Shubbak Festival in London) who focuses on presenting work of the Mena region, said 'Of course festivals are still relevant, if tomorrow there are no festivals, I'm sure someone will invent a new festival, the real question is whether existing festivals are still relevant today.' So the question could be, what festivals need to reflect upon to remain or become relevant again in today's fast changing world.

And the world is changing again. We may have a new president for the US while finally also republicans are urging Trump to concede to his defeat. There may be hope for the Paris climate agreement again with activists scrutinizing Biden's appointments of his staff. And may this be a transition to the first black woman president of the US? Though the road will still be long as the US has a highly polarized society which has been fueled under 4 years presidency of Trump and not only in the US, in Europe, in Hungary, Poland, in Turkey, in my own country. How to heal this and how to transform this again? For one it needs more moderate, humble leaders and humane leaders who abide by the rule of law.

Maybe arts and festivals can help in this transition? Can lead by example? Or is that a burden too heavy to carry? Is that not our job? But now I'm leaping of already in our next training on festivals and social cohesion.

Covid-19 and the transformation it brings along runs alongside movement uprisings as Black lives matter, it highlighted continuing inequality; it is connected to climate change. It has put a focus on these, but at the same time, I feel we are also forgetting some other crisis in the light of Covid 19: the ongoing refugee crisis, the conflict in Yemen, rising famine in Burkina Faso in West Africa's Sahel region, northeastern Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen...



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From what we've seen with The Festival Academy, there has been a growing social awareness of festival makers, a reflection on what role festivals can play to counteract polarization in societies, intolerance, being a safe space for people to express themselves, to connect, to reflect and learn about different perspectives and idea. Festivals are not islands but are connected to the world and what is going on there.

Can COVID 19 also break down some walls of major institutions, with venues being unable to work within their doors, what are the possibilities of public space art or festivals who are used to work in unconventional spaces to re-imagine programming and curating of these venues and spaces? And when things turn back to a kind of normal will there be changes that remain? Can we think alongside with other organisations and structures to make them more accessible, to lower the threshold for people to feel like they can belong there?

As said, I believe generally social awareness has become a much more important focus for festivals in past years, and Covid 19 has given that an extra push. Festivals evolve together with the world, art and artists have always helped us metabolise changes, crises, loss, or help us generate understanding in complex issues. One of the things which is specific about our times is that the challenges the world is confronted with today cannot be solved by one country, one sector, one expertise.

COVID 19 has urged us to reflect upon the purpose of our festivals, the why, for who, with who and how. And to connect with other festivals or other fields of expertise, as research, science, philanthropy, social movements etc. This was already happening pre-Covid, but seems to have accelerated as well. There seems to be a high need for international exchange, collaboration and solidarity which I believe will be key in the development and survival of festivals.

As realities keep on changing, lockdown, easing of lockdown, a potential vaccine, festival need to stay flexible to adapt to these. A plan you made yesterday does not work anymore tomorrow and to take your stakeholders along in the process. To keep on engaging with your communities, to know who your 'changing' audiences are, and to reflect on the best format in a specific moment and time.



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I think alongside with this a notion of intentionality has arisen, which has given space to a more meaningful programming, it opened a new window of realities, and a sort of collective experience coming out of COVID 19. Though the experience has not been similar to all, and some have been affected much more gravely based on where they are located and which means they have.

A lot of festivals went through a process of un-making – to undo the festival, and the process of how you do that in a good way with your stakeholders. Festivals have been forced also to communicate about these with their stakeholders; their audiences, sponsors, artists etc. and amongst curators I imagine

As Tisa Ho from Hong Kong Arts festival said during an alumni session, ‘sometimes you have to have something taken away from you to realise how dear it is to you’;

I had the experience in the past months to sit in a physical theatre show again at the Theaterfestival, Belgium, and it was not the same as before, I was so aware of the privilege of it, of how I enjoyed it. To have this live exchange.

So as festivals shift and transform to online, hybrid, physical with physical distancing measures, how does this influence our curating and our programmes? Which new partnerships go along with this? How do we care for our artists from a distance? Which new ways of international programming emerge while travel is still limited versus new ways of local embedment? How can we maintain or create quality in what we offer online? How do we engage our audiences through our curation? Which tools do we need to present these online works? What do our teams need in this transformative process?

We have seen a shift over the years of this one curator/ artistic directors, to curatorial boards, advisory experts, insofar as to curators teams instead of one person knowing it all. This goes along I think with the internationalization of the cultural and festival world, the professionalization, the multitude of productions, one cannot grasp all of that. Along with this we have also seen shifts to handing over the power to a guest curator, someone coming from a different perspective and background.

There is also a growing awareness and reflection on underrepresented voices, whose stories are being told, and by who? For whom? Who is presenting these stories, who can frame these stories in different contexts, where viewers don’t necessarily have the background/ history and knowledge to understand these works? And how much of our curatorial power are we ready to share? And if we do so, when we are being challenged by it because of our limited understanding of the world from our own perspective, how do we engage in constructive intercultural dialogue? How do we listen, really listen to each other and be heard and try and understand each other’s realities?

So questions are also as always when dealing with a power position, what are the ethics of our curation? What are the prejudices that influence our curation? How to open up your view to the world? And the view of our audiences?



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And more importantly, who are the ones we shouldn't forget? What are the realities we shouldn't forget? And if curating comes from the Latin world Curare – to treat, to cure, to care, how can we care more, better for a more just and equal world for all?

I don't run a festival so I don't really have a curatorial statement, but of course we are curating many voices with The Festival Academy, so when I need to reflect upon one it would be 'How to care for those who go unheard or unseen?'

As a conclusion, I want to share with you this poem of the Sudanese poet Emi Mahmoud she wrote for World Refugee Day 2020, entitled "[The Seven Stages of Grief During Coronavirus.](#)"