



THE FESTIVAL ACADEMY

Atelier for Arts and Production Managers Elefsina-Beirut: Module I – 26 February 2021

On Decolonisation and Climate change and the interrelation of both.

Opening Remarks by Inge Ceustermans – General Director of The Festival Academy – Brussels

Dear mentors, speakers, participants and partners

I'm delighted to welcome you, together with Katie and Anaïz from the TFA team and Angeliki from the 2023 ELEVSIS team, to the first Module of the Atelier for Arts and Production Managers. Huge thanks of course go to our partners ELEVSIS 2023, Drosos Foundation, Zoukak Theatre Company, Artlink and Creative Europe to make this programme possible, and especially to our longstanding partners as in Open Society Foundations, and our initiator, the European Festivals Association. Thanks to our mentors and speakers, and to Mike van Graan for developing this programme with us.

I would like you to close your eyes for a moment and imagine we are in small harbour town in Greece, 40 minutes away from Athens, in the old workers Union building, only a 2-minute walk away from the harbour and the sea. We just had delicious Greek coffee and are looking forward to mezze in the sun later on. Only last week, Greece, like Belgium by the way, was still covered in heavy snowfall, with spring temperatures foreseen in the weather forecast.

We are not meeting physically for this Module I, but let's make each other a promise that we will meet in Beirut at the end of the year to make up for that. Both we, as well as Beirut, will need it.

We are currently facing circumstances that are often out of our control with this ongoing pandemic, and vaccination strategies that are getting off the ground quickly in some places of the world, and not at all in others, due to the same market-driven strategies that have enlarged already existing inequalities. We try and make the best of these circumstances and to find solutions to facilitate these regional and/ or global exchanges, which are needed now more than ever. To make sense of the time we are living in, to not go through this alone, to identify what is outside of our control as well as what we can have an impact on.

Whenever I do these introductions, they are closely related to what I have read recently.

There are two things that stand out. One is [a letter from the Mexican artist Lázaro Gajón Rodríguez](#) of the artists' company [Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol](#) in response to Jerome Bell, a French

artists, related to Jerome's non-flying policy. Another is [a letter from Emily Johnson](#), a First Nations artist from Alaska now based in New York, to the National Endowment for the Arts, to share with them as a Yup'ik womxn and artist her experience with the Executive Director of Peak Performances at Montclair State University, Jedidiah Wheeler.

Both letters are indicative of our times and written by people speaking from a space of underrepresented voices, or from a space where their artwork has mainly been able to exist and develop thanks to funding from rich countries, located in areas heavily affected by the fallout of climate change - though not necessarily responsible for it. Where Lazaro describes the Mexican artists' reality and what not flying would mean for him in these circumstances (infrastructure as in no extensive rail road system, funding, coproduction, partnerships, access to international work etc.), Johnson responds to white male dominancy and colonial approaches of large institutions. Working with Emily Johnson includes agreeing to a far-reaching decolonisation policy of the organisation and signing up to a decolonisation rider.

So many things are changing today, change that does not necessarily go in a seemingly good direction, bringing people and places to the brink of what they can take, or challenges they never could imagine they would have to take on, as in post-explosion Beirut.

We see the loss of mobility, incredible losses of a sector, loss of income, rising inequality and a growing divide between those who are near the well and those who aren't.

At the same time, what I see as moving in the last months is people speaking up, be it black people, LGBTQ+ people, women, First Nations people, the formation of new movements and networks, the rise of the collective need above the individual need.

When talking with people from the Greek festival network that came out of the Atelier for Greek festival managers which we organised with Elefsis 2021 last year and out of which this Atelier grew, the conversation only one year ago was often about the fact artists did not take care of each other, there were no solidarity mechanisms, or joint movements – all this has been shifting in past months with a rising MeToo movement, with artist coming onto the streets in a 'live art work' to support art workers etc.

There is kind of momentum – for huge change to manifest – but when we talk about transformative change, when dealing with current issues as decolonisation or climate change, we need to look at the consequences in a broad perspective and on a large scale, not only within our own realm of effect.

As stipulated above, mobility of artists including air travel has to do with 'infrastructure of countries,' 'livelihoods of people,'... change, even well intended, is not always good. We need to think beyond the impact of our own sometimes privileged context.

In both cases, the letters are addressed to white male directors who have been working in very privileged positions. Another conversation I had with a dramaturg of a major institution, who was responsible for the diversity policy within that institute, also talked about a personally harmful

and traumatising experience, in which as soon as he tried to move away from only the programming in order to change the structure, the governance, and challenged the status quo, his efforts were stopped.

What I see is, in all three examples, that artists don't want to be a 'token' anymore for programmes that sound good but don't do good, that work around 'decolonisation' without knowing what it stands for, that try to be radical only because it's fashionable, that work on a diversity policy which cannot touch the board of directors, that tell us we should all stop flying now, while we have not contributed as much to international flying as that one artist has done up till now...

All these things relate to the same colonial structure which is being kept in place by those in power, who address the issues, thus silencing the crowds, have others pay the price, but who do not delve into the complexity, difficulty and bravery that real transformative change asks for.

The dialectic, the conversation around these issues is very important I believe, and the fact that some things just do not pass anymore. Actions are taken in the public sphere to oppose these forces and draw attention to the consequences these actions can have, as for example the internal voices daring to speak up now about the behaviour of this director from Peak Performance within their institute, confirming Johnson's experience for which he will hopefully be held accountable.

If we want to be 'artists of the future' as Jerome bell calls it, we cannot NOT take into account decolonisation issues, social injustice and climate justice and we cannot consider one issue without the others, as climate justice is interrelated with social justice. This goes beyond an individual decision of not flying anymore in a context where this decision does not impact a livelihood in the same way it would affect many others. Which doesn't mean I believe it to be a good idea Jerome Bell is not flying anymore, and proposing another way of international collaboration which obviously seems to work for him. We do need to address these issues, as there will be no future if we don't. These are the themes that drive our times.

For change to be effective, and really transformative, we need to dig deeper, we need to do research, get to know each other, build trust, empower others, share power, listen, be ready not to be right, go beyond what you thought was possible, break down walls and through ceilings for yourself and others. And this in a space of 'continuous construction.' It is a process we undertake together, and the outcome may be different from what we expected, or imagined at the onset, but it is an adventure one undertakes 'together'.

It asks for a conversation. And the necessary respect for each one's place, circumstances and perspective in that conversation.

It also asks for the investigation of our terminology sometimes, what decolonisation means in one context may be understood differently in another, same with freedom of expression, mobility, the different roles and titles of running and managing festivals, etc.

We are talking about change on every level, not only in the work we make or curate, but in our audiences, on the level of our governance., our funding etc. This process takes time, and you need support for this, as in people, experience, knowledge, skills and resources.

You may be thinking, 'I'm part of a Balkan, Mena, and Mediterranean training, why are we talking about artists from Mexico to Alaska,' but this is exactly what I think is important today. To see that these issues and changes are present in a global context and that our organisations and festivals, though locally embedded, don't exist in a vacuum, or separate from urgent realities that shift and impact our world today.

Both letters, as well the information on the situations in Greece and Lebanon, were brought to my attention by alumni from our global community counting today 700+ festival managers from 90+ countries and which you will become part of after these five days, and with which you will have the possibility to continue to engage with.

And this is what this programme is all about for me: To build these connections that keep you informed, aware, that trigger your thinking to go beyond what you are familiar with, to try and identify with other people living in other circumstances and see things from their shoes. To make an effort to think not only from your context but to think about the implications, changes within your context may have on your surroundings, local, regional as well as global.

The purpose of the training is to build a kind of support network, one that is only just beginning, a family of people who are doing similar work as you are doing, who can advise you, guide you, share with you. As support means so much more than money alone. As how did we finally meet that donor we were hoping for, well through someone we knew and who knew us.

We cannot know everything, in fact we can only know very little, and therefore we need others to learn from, to help us, and find our ways through this moment in time which we call our life. On so many levels this seems only natural (as in family supporting us when when start one of our own), but this is also very much true for the work we are doing.

So, thank you for being here; as Isabel Allende says about her writing 'Half the job is to show up. You show up and you open your mind and heart, and something will happen. I have learned in years of writing that I have to be patient.... if I give myself time, and I relax, it will happen.'

So, relax and enjoy the 5 days!

By way of a personal introduction and conclusion, I would like to share this piece of writing by [Ibrahim Nehme](#), a creator and speaker from Lebanon. His work is a cross-pollination between journalism, activism and creative expression, and could be understood as a series of attempts to shift the collective consciousness. I quote:

It's been three weeks since the explosion in Beirut and I still have no words.

"Are you in pain?" people ask me. I wonder about what they mean. I wonder about what to say.

I think of the deep injury in my left foot, the twelve stitches in my right arm, the tightness in my lower back. I try to find words to describe how it feels to have your flesh and bone invaded by broken glass and toxic nitrate. I think about hidden pains I have not yet located in my body because it is still so soon, and I am still so numb. I think of Beirut and what was done to her. I think of trauma and what it does to us. I think of recurring nightmares at night. I think of complete strangers I see at the doctor's clinic or on the way there, and of what I see in their eyes. I think of injustice. I think of our revolution. I think of disappointment. I also think of beauty; the beauty of pain and how it sometimes brings out the best in each one of us.

"Are you in pain?" people ask me. I wonder about what they mean. I wonder about what to say.

I think of all that. And then, I fumble for words.

Are you in pain?

No feels a little dishonest. But yes, is a doorway into the unknown. Yes, can go places I do not necessarily want to take the askers of the question with me to. So, I say sometimes. I say a little bit. I talk about how pain comes and goes. I talk about painkillers. I talk about not being able to feel a lot. I use but a lot, mostly to explain that it gets better or that it could have been worse, to keep the conversation light, to conveniently talk my way out of the question.

Are you in pain?

Close your eyes. How do you feel? What do you see? What would you say?

Are you in pain?

Yes, I am. Yes, thank you. Yes, I appreciate your concern. Yes, I really truly do.

But, for now, let's leave it here, because I still have no words.