

Chiang Mai 2016

« Car le vrai rôle d'un festival est d'aider les
artistes à oser, à entreprendre des projets... »
Bernard Faivre d'Arcier

Atelier for Young Festival Managers

1 - 7 December 2016

Closing words by

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Closing Ceremony of the Atelier for Young Festival Managers Chiang Mai 2016
07 December 2016, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Dear Mr. Krit Thanavanich, Vice-Governor of Chiang Mai,
Dear Mr. Jirut Issarangul Na Ayuthaya, Vice President of TCEB,
Dear Honorary guests,
Dear colleagues,

So here we are, already at the end of the 7 days.

I believe I can say this Atelier was some kind of a food festival. We've been to so many nice places and tried such a variety of different tastes. An art in itself. We have met with many artists and visited several cultural places. A true immersion in Thai culture. All thanks to the great preparations of the team here.

During the 7 days - a mini-festival called by one of the participants - we have tackled many issues, during presentations, amongst yourselves in working groups, during informal moments, in the "Warm Up" bar, in the swimming pool or illegally in the Jacuzzi at night. I hope you have gathered new ideas, inspiration, new ways of seeing things and above all new friends. And that this Atelier has and will change your life and has planted many seeds to sparkle your thinking process and imagination. Or as Mark said: "to know again why you are doing what you are doing."

You dealt with topics as local and international production; audience participation and integration, artistic integrity, risk taking, building trust; how to continue a successful festival, ambience, partnerships, succession planning; how to deal with restrictions from the establishment and institutions, censorship, restrictive working conditions, political situation; embracing uncertainty, financial risk, social change. And for each you have formulated some action points which will be shared with the broader community.

You have discussed a new idea or a new name for a 'festival' because everything is called a festival today. We have been jokingly referring to a name change to a 'nextival', because that seems to be the main question. What's next? What is the future of festivals? How can we stay relevant? How can we be heard by the general public?

During the opening ceremony both Nele Hertling and I talked about the urgency to act in today's world. Nele said that the quote by Bernard Faivre D'Arcier and motto of the Atelier, that "we need to dare", must be extended and that we need to question ourselves more critically about the role of art and culture. Bernard also referred to this while talking about the changes the world is currently undergoing. This came back in several ways in the presentations by the mentors and the discussions with you all. We are aware that we need to ask ourselves why the "Arts" don't seem to be heard these days, not as much as we want anyway.

I heard Mark Ball say 'art changed my life'. This is the same for me, art has opened me up to life, it challenges me to see things differently, to see diversity as a positive thing and not a threat, to stay curious, to have pleasure, to enjoy... Mark Ball said Brexit and Trump is not a failure of economics but a failure of cultural policy. Arts Councils invest less and less in culture, art is less present in school curriculums etc. And that we need to build up a new sense of legitimacy together with our audiences. Robyn Archer also addressed the issue of legitimacy.

She said:

'Try a day without the Arts'. While we think it is in theory possible, you would have to be dressed in an undersigned hessian sack, with blindfold and earplugs, in order to avoid things which artists have created. So, is life actually bearable in the twenty-first century without music, without imagery? And if this is the case we need to demand recognition of artists as providers of 'essential services'. We are not the luxury option, not the optional extra, but providers of things which are essential to life. Artists should be acknowledged as being as important as other providers of essential services – doctors, nurses, firemen and garbage collectors.'

So why is this essential role of art, to challenge our views, to open people up to different perspectives or the effect of it today so much in danger? Why don't we seem to be heard by the general public? Do we only have so called freedom of speech in the west because no one is listening to us? Are we, through the simplification in a binary world where everything is black and white losing the ability for a complex language in a more and more complex world? And if so, why is this complex language not understood anymore?

'Have we just been too polite?' as Robyn said.

We need to address things as they are again. We need to call racism "racism" when we see it, sexism "sexism", prejudice "prejudice", injustice "injustice" and act upon that.

Essentially I think we still live in a world where the relations between the global north and the global south are fundamentally unequal and as long as resources are so unequally divided we will never be in peace. Is this idealistic and a reality never to be achieved? But what if we cannot dream anymore?

I was quite pleasantly surprised with what, one of our participants from India, Virkein dared say in her blog. I think we can take her as an example of the language we need to practice again today;

‘What I am truly intrigued by is the lack of interest and effort from, I would not say all but most of my peers from the Western Hemisphere who share this space with me, to be informed and acquainted to a context that sits outside of their own. To not maybe understand in such a short period of time, but acknowledge the diversity that sits within Asia, and to consider the strength of that which is unknown. To connect not through differences but through the power of collective thinking.

I find a lot of my peers discomfited by the complexity of context, while this fascinates me to no extent. Because undoubtedly and history confirms, the problems of one can find creative solutions only by or inspired by the 'other'. To embrace the uncertainty of the unknown is not a singular action but a way of life. And to question along the way, every time you feel most comfortable.

The arts around the world have the power and with that the responsibility to create and share what the world does NOT want to see. I don't believe that's a choice we make as a curator. It is our duty to open the minds of those around you, to touch the lives of many through the work we do, and to strive not just for excellence or perfection but warmth and compassion. And that is the choice we must make as a facilitator of the arts. ‘

Seong Hee said most of Asian history is written by non-Asians and she explained how she tried to bring the focus back on the art created in Asia and the importance of giving a platform to that instead of always directing the eyes to the West.

In this Atelier where you are together to think collectively, we might want to think freely and imagine beyond our personal contexts. But I believe that in certain regions of the world the context is so defining and compelling that you cannot think outside of it.

Therefore we need empathy and make an effort to try and replace ourselves in that context and try to think up solutions from another perspective than the one we know. This is an important message, when we are aware of how we are being perceived by each other, we can do something about it so thank you Virkein for being so courageous to bring this up.

Kee Hong Low drew during his presentation our attention to the beautiful art work of Ant Hampton.

HELLO

I'M SORRY IF THIS SEEMS STRANGE,

BUT I'M TRYING TO HAVE A CONVERSATION

WITH SOMEONE I WOULDN'T NORMALLY GET TO SPEAK WITH.

This work was projected on the ICC building in Hong Kong. By example of this work, Kee Hong talked about the importance of planting seeds to start a thinking process; and to think about what is your impact of what you can do to your own society also addressing the urgency to act today.

The Festival Academy and the Atelier also have a responsibility in this. We need to be self-critical as well. It is high time that we include more speakers from the global south who can challenge the thinking of the global north and who can break through our comfort zone. This is urgent now and will happen in the next editions. We are a global programme, originating from Europe, supported by Europe but also by partners all over the world. If we want to be truly global we need to include that on all aspects of the training format. We must start seeing things differently again and not get stuck in the usual routines or failures.

You are now a network of 35 participants from 20 countries and 4 continents, Africa sadly missing in this edition. And that is the main value of the Atelier. You have access to 435 people of 66 countries. You can challenge each other and learn from each other. And above all you are all people, human beings to take care of yourself and each other.

I wish to conclude with the words of the Nigerian women writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who wrote an article in the New Yorker only recently which is called 'Now is the time to talk about what we are actually talking about' and which I recommend you to read.

'Now is the time to remember that, in a wave of dark populism sweeping the West, there are alternative forms (...) Now is the time to counter lies with facts, repeatedly and unflinchingly, while also proclaiming the greater truths: of our equal humanity, of decency, of compassion. Every precious ideal must be reiterated, every obvious argument made, because an ugly idea left unchallenged begins to turn the color of normal. It does not have to be like this.'

I really enjoyed my time in Thailand and the encounters with all the people.

I would like to thank all the cultural venues that welcomed us. Also thank you to our partners Korea Arts Council, Social Fonds Podiumkunsten, the National Institute of Dramatic Art and Creative Europe for their generous support in making this Atelier possible.

But especially I would like to thank once more once more our host, the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau, its president and vice-president and its marvelous team with Supawan Teerarat, Harisuda Boonyawat, Kaewkan, Nimit Pipitkul who curated the artistic programme and many others, the students who have guided us through the days, the catering teams, The Festival Academy team with Laure and Debora, the photographer and cameraman, the drivers of the vans. You made our stay unforgettable. Please give them a big applause. Kop khun kha.

Thank you also to Hugo De Greef for coordinating and moderating the Chiang Mai Atelier, and thank you once again to the dear mentors, Nele Hertling, Mark Ball, Bernard Faivre d'Arcier, Seong Hee Kim Low Kee Hong, Robyn Archer who already left and to all guest speakers. And a very special thank you to you, dear participants, for being such a wonderful group!