

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

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Keynote speech by

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Dear participants , dear colleagues,

I feel honoured and happy to be here with you and look forward to a week of dialogue and debate.

We all come from different parts of the world, I myself from Berlin in Germany, but I am sure we share a concern for a peaceful development of this world and for the respect for Freedom and Human Rights for everybody. On this common belief we will base our work during the coming days.

We also share a professional background – working for art and culture, most of us in the context of a festival. And this is the aim of us meeting here in the beautiful city of Chiang Mai – through exchange and listening - learn and understand about festivals, their important role for artists, for audiences but also about the role of festivals for society, in a local, regional or even national and international context. We are happy to be in Chiang Mai, a city with a strong tradition and actual commitment for art and culture and we are sure to be able to learn from these local experiences. Festivals can be based on different art forms, - performing arts, literature, music, film, but also architecture or design – but in our reflections and working structures this will not make any differences.

Bernard Faivre d'Arcier, longtime famous director of the Avignon Festival and closely connected to the Atelier project defined a kind of ‚Motto‘ for it: ‚The role of a festival is to help artists to dare, to engage in new projects.‘ I do of course agree in principle, but I think it is necessary today to extend this Motto. More and more in times - when globally an increasing number of human beings is threatened by

political, religious or climate change radical developments, by social and natural catastrophies - we have to question ourselves more critically about the role of art and culture.

Is there a chance of influence, to support a belief in other values, in teaching understanding, a feeling of ,belonging', of caring.

Can festivals react, or better act, apart from their role of helping the artist?

Do festivals really have a responsibility towards society, their audience and the urban context?

Let us find out together, if and how festivals could or should become more than interesting artistic events or just happy entertainment – through and with the work of artists. Festivals have, next to their local importance the possibility to open a window to the world, to create awareness about the immense diversity of this world, based on the visionary power of art, the persuading influence of artistic imagination.

I would like to quote from a kind of mission statement from EFA, that initiated and developed our Atelier: ,Festivals have been working across borders and cultures since the dawn of festivals, before Europe was a project of unity, before Europe was a space that aimed to facilitate cross-border exchanges. EFA brings together festivals to inspire one another, fosters an exchange of knowledge, helps festivals to speak with one strong voice to shape policy developments, increases networking opportunities and keeps festivals informed about issues at stake in the festivals and cultural world, all under the flag of artistic excellence and internationalisation.'

Although founded in Europe in 1952 as a chance of establishing trust and a peaceful environment after the destructive World War II, the activities and visions are open worldwide and this mission statement is true all over again. As said before, we, individuals and groups that engage in artistic and cultural work have to keep and develop our conviction that these can be used as tools against tendencies of fear, hate and despair, to give people an idea about the chance to work for another reality.

I like to remember and tell you about a very personal experience: as a child I lived through the last year of World War II in a small village, where my jewish mother had found a refuge with me in the house and family of the protestant priest. At that time there were many families, mostly women and children - in the same house as refugees from the chaos and terrors of war. Everybody was full of fear and despair. In this situation, the adults had the marvellous idea to inspire us kids, to create a small theatre and develop some performances. We did this with enthusiasm and presented the results - as our first festival - with the (for us) amazing success, seeing all those sad and nervous adults for a great moment full of happiness and hope. For the first time I realised and experienced, what ,art' - even in this very

modest way -, could do and I kept this feeling that became over the time a conviction. I knew, I couldn't change the world, but I could give those people around me some kind of belief for a moment. Later in my professional live in moments of a crisis or uncertainty - why and for whom we did all that difficult work, - I remembered those feelings and they helped me to go on. Another very recent example concerning this matter is Berlin which receives today - as many other places in the world - a very big number of migrants and refugees, with most of them living in very difficult circumstances for longer times, without work, not knowing the language, having no privacy at all and with very fragile chances for the future.

Cultural initiatives and individuals engage themselves to create projects for – mostly - children and their mothers, trying to activate them in special groups with musicians, dancers or actors. The result is mostly very encouraging - the participants loose their fear and shyness, they open up to the others, they start to communicate between themselves and to others and find a way to express themselves. In the institution to which I belong, the ‚Academy of Arts‘ we very recently organised a festival under the title „Uncertain States“, to which we invited – or produced - projects that worked in close cooperation between refugees and some professionals from different countries (Tunisia, Ukraine, Poland, Italy, Iran, Iraq). Most of them presented performances with women and men with different migrational backgrounds, having found through this cooperation a new kind of identity and feeling of belonging. Through their activity as actors, dancers, musicians they had been able to tell their stories and to find a new ‚family‘.

I tell you this to encourage you to consider as well these possibilities for festivals, knowing that this is never an easy process – foreigners , even artists from foreign countries can bring disturbances, provocations, new challenges – but even than it is a way to create more curiosity about the ‚others‘, to support openness and tolerance. We have to learn to listen to each other, to accept our differences as a positive challenge and enrichment.

Coming back to Bernard Faivre d'Arcier, it is of course one of the most important roles of a festival to care for the freedom and the necessary basis for the work of artists. A festival can create the facilities for their visions and give them the basis for their work and its presentation to audiences.

We can and we have to defend art against ignorance, against censorship, against economic interests, budget cuts, against a tendency in many cities to be driven away from centretown working spaces for the sake of investment interests. We also have to care for the young and upcoming artists, for radical and experimental new ideas, ways of expression and structures next to the already wellknown, accepted work. Festivals can do that, since they usually have a greater visibility and chance, compared to the cultural institutions working in continuity in cities – and this should be a responsibility for festivals as well. And of course it can be a great pleasure, to work with an artist on the development of a first presented idea, to give him the chance of time and space and of true support and belief. It can become the most joyful experience if you can witness the success of an artist, a project, your festival believed in and made possible. There are impressive examples in the history of festivals – we can speak about it during our working days. And - being in Thailand, in Chiang Mai - a festival can as

well open the doors to give audiences a chance to learn something about different cultures, traditions, actual problems and changes. A festival can decide to present theatre, music, dance, literature, films from a distant part of the world and – again – provoke interest, curiosity and understanding for the „other“ instead of fear and aggression.

With this I come back to the different roles a festival can play. It is – for me – absolutely necessary to be consciously aware about the intention, about the vision a festival wants to follow, the why, where and for whom of a festival. To be able to program a festival today is a treasure, maybe a professional challenge but a luxury in times when societies all over the world seem to be in disturbing transitional processes - this gives us, working in culture, a new important role.

More than ever there is a need for communication, for cooperation, a new interest of sharing ideas, convictions and visions to stand up against threatening developments. Festivals bring together people, enable exchange, new contacts and friendship, often the start for longterm relationships, sometimes for new shared projects. They should give enough space for these chances, meetings, including parties – festivals should also be opportunities for shared joy and pleasure.

And – I am convinced it is important to open to as many parts of our societies – including our political decision makers, they have to experience the powerful influences of art and culture together with their citizens to understand their role as facilitators for the working conditions, for the security and freedom of artists in changing societies. We have to invite them to a continuous dialogue for a better understanding and cooperation.

Let us use every opportunity we face for this important communication and discourse.

I am sure we have many topics, many questions – already raised in your papers – to fill the coming days with challenging talks and discoveries - I look forward to that with great curiosity.

Let me finish my short speech with a quote from the well known filmdirector Wim Wenders:

„The cultural dimension needs room, „room to play“ , in order to be effective. It needs space if it is to let openness unfold and work between the lines. Only then can it work, in freedom to give this room requires political courage. Art and Culture are not profitable, they can't be assessed and evaluated. But they are EFFECTIVE. And they have a great power over people. They give people a sense of security and identity, of belonging, pride, meaning.‘

Enjoy this evening, enjoy this week together – thank you for your attention.