

SHANGHAI 2017

« 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 and Cultural Managers 17 - 23 October 2017

Speech by

Inge Ceustermans

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Opening Ceremony of the Atelier for Young Festival and Cultural Managers Shanghai 2017
17 October, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

Dear Vice President, Yi Gong Thank you for welcoming us at the China Shanghai International Festival,

Dear Marcin Grabiec from the EU-Delegation to China,

Dear Nick Marchand,

Dear Paul Freches;

Dear Honorary guests,

Dear mentors, and dear participants;

I'm delighted to find you all here today at The Atelier for Young Festival and Cultural Managers in Shanghai. I also welcome you in the name of Mr. **Jan Briers**, the President of the European Festivals Association who will join us for the last days of the Atelier and Ms. **Kathrin Deventer**, Secretary General of the European Festivals Association who asked me to extend her words of welcome to you as well.

This very special edition is taking place in the framework of the high-level people to people dialogue between China and the EU, co-organised by the Center for China Shanghai International Arts Festival and supported by the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China and by the European Commission through the cultural diplomacy platform. We aim, as the Platform says, with this pilot edition to create better understanding between diverse cultures; and we have all ingredients set: we are here with 44 participants coming from all over the world and 12 mentors coming also from all corners of this planet.

We are delighted that our partners in Shanghai, the Center for China Shanghai International Arts Festival is hosting this pilot with us following the 3 Ateliers we had set up in Eastern Asia in the past: in Singapore, South Korea and Thailand. Together with the team, we have prepared an inspiring programme.

Let me tell you a bit more about the European Festivals Association (EFA).

EFA looks back at many years of collaboration with Asian festivals and cultural organisations. In 2004, EFA contributed to the set-up of the Association of Asian Performing Arts Festivals (AAPAF). In 2010, a commitment of collaboration on intercultural dialogue, training formats, networking and more collaboration aspects was signed by both Associations; one of the outcomes was the Singapore Atelier. Beyond these partnerships, EFA and its members have continuously initiated artistic collaborations across Asia and Europe. In this context networking is crucial as well as access to information on artists, artistic trends, cultural organisations, and networks of festivals in Asia and in Europe. As well as the annual participation of EFA members in the China Shanghai International Arts Festival and China Shanghai Performing Arts Fair for several years now.

The Atelier is a remarkable project, set up already 10 years ago by some remarkable people as we have here amongst us, in the first place Hugo De Greef, but also Nele Hertling, Robyn Archer and some who will arrive in the coming days as Bernard Faivre D'Arcier. Passionate people who had not only a vision but who also did it and believed that maybe they had to contribute something to the young generation.

Today we are 10 years further and we look back: 10 years, 13 Ateliers, in Europe, in Asia, the Arab world...an independent organization, The Festival Academy, a global network of today counting 450 festival and cultural manager from 67 countries, people who will influence the artistic landscape in the coming years. A high quality programme that attracts many new partners, interest and a collaboration as this one within this unique framework.

Having looked back it is time now to move forward and into the future again with a vision that is aligned to the world of today: with the first Atelier to take place in Africa in March 2018, to extend the pool of mentors with speakers from different regions as well from the global south, so participants coming from the global south, working in a totally different context feel better represented as well, to become a truly global organisation, in its activities and where they take place, in the network, through its governance, to give a face to this unique network, or better community, not of institutions but of people, of global leaders, change-makers, you! To pass on knowledge and experience and to include alumni as speakers as well in the programme or young people in general as wisdom has (almost) nothing to do with age.

With the Atelier we are connected to the world. And where is this world today? With the North Korea - US military build-up of the past months, with Trump trying to turn back time on many levels, leaving Unesco just as a new director is appointed, leaving the Paris Climate agreement and now threatening the nuclear agreement with Iran, close up borders and building walls, with the EU showing cracks through referenda for independence, Brexit, the rise of populist leaders, censorship...with 300 dead in the recent Mogadishu attack, with human rights violations in Myanmar to name only one of many, with frequent terrorist attacks in regions we don't necessarily hear a lot about in the world news, with continuing terrorism globally, with already 6 years of war in Syria with almost half a million people killed, and more than 5 million on the run. 6 years! my youngest son just turned 7... and generally with ongoing inequality between global north and global south; with Irma's and other hurricanes trying to tell us something about the natural resources of this one globe which are at stake. Superwoman would have a tough job saving the world today!

If we read the news, the state of the world seems most of the time desperate, but where do we want to point our vision?

For the first time in many years I spent my summer holidays in my own country, Belgium. It was a period of rest, reflection and looking at the world with new eyes. I had forgotten how beautiful my country can be. At a certain point I found myself at the 1995 geographical center of the EU. 15 countries had joined by then and a strange glass sculpture was being erected in the woods of this French part of Belgium. I was not aware that this was there and it reminded me of how remarkable and visionary this project was and still is.

Today the European Union counts 28 countries amongst its members and has alliances with many other nations and continents. Despite the debacles it is faced with, with growing nationalism, populist leaders, xenophobia, terrorism, 'Brexit's' etc. it still is one of the most remarkable projects in history and a very special and privileged place to be able to live in, travel in, enjoy culture in. Many dream of joining and wish to risk their life to experience that. Although the freedom and open-mindedness this project stands for, it is not necessarily what people experience upon arrival here.

We need to continue resisting prejudice and at the same time build a new future that is everything but limiting. A future that does not reject but embraces differences, contrast and diversity. A future that is challenging and tests its limits and looks for new meaning.

The EU today realises that we need to operate within this global context if we want to face the challenges of today and this project with the Ministry of Culture China is an example that can actually influence collaborations between China and the world between the 44 participants and mentors present here.

In Brussels the commissioner of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, Tibor Navracsics, and Federica Mogherini; the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission have joined forces to put culture at the core not only of the cultural policy but also at the core of the foreign policy of the EU. This is a recent concept and a very important signal to the EU and the world and this project is one of the first to be supported through this initiative and Cultural Diplomacy Platform to execute this new strategy. Both Navracsics and Mogherini are aware we need creativity and diplomacy in so many ways these days. And, more importantly, that culture can play an important role in this.

When announcing this strategy for cultural diplomacy in Brussels Mogherini said:

‘Culture can be the place where people meet and make the most of their diversity. Not isolation but openness is what made Europe such an incredible place and project.’

And that is also exactly why the European Festivals Association, the network that initiated and is running this programme has been set up. The European Festivals Association, for more than 66 years now, is a network of festival makers that stand up for intercultural dialogue, for friendship and trust across all kinds of borders. It believes that the power of civil society cooperation and active exchanges is much deeper than (sometimes short-term, sometimes long-term) political frictions and borders. That is why it has had members from all parts of Europe in the association since its inception in 1952 even when the cold war in Europe forbid every official dialogue. The power of arts and culture and of people working together goes beyond external restraints.

The values the EU stands for are not to be taken for granted though, freedom of speech, freedom of mobility, of equal rights are under pressure today. You are all privileged to be able to be here today, not all of us mentors and participants made it here today because of visa issues or politics.

We have here with us in the next seven days, Robyn Archer, Mark Ball, Hugo De Greef, Bernard Faivre d’Arcier, Nele Hertling, Hongming Lin, Gebing Tian, Catherine J. Wang and Rongjun (Nick) Yu, Jinghui Meng, Ophelia Huang and many others. On top you will be immersed in the local cultural scene of Shanghai and China and you will meet many artists and cultural players from here. And this all under the coordination of Hugo De Greef who I would like to thank especially for his 10-year investment in guiding these Ateliers.

I invite all of you in the next days to take on a beginner’s mind, to open up, to throw everything you’ve learned out of the window and to profit from this unique and privileged opportunity to learn from your peers coming from different backgrounds geographically, disciplinary, small/large venues...

And to allow to shift your perspective.

I saw an artist this summer, Ali Farka Touré from Mali, at Documenta, the 5 year art biennial in Kassel who says: For some people, when you say ‘Timbuktu’ it is like the end of the world. But this is not true. I am from Timbuktu and I can tell you we are right at the heart of the world.’

To start with that perspective, that all sitting here are at the centre of their world and have equal rights as such to be part of the discussion, .equal rights to resources, equal rights to be heard, equal rights to participate in arts and culture...

You can in the next days open up your perspectives, challenge your views and learn from each other. You are given a platform to meet and to make connections with a diversity of creative minds. So I invite you all to listen to each other and, to get inspired, to question yourself, your festival or your cultural venue and the work you are doing there, the choices you are making every day. To share about your challenges, your success, your failure.

The Atelier is a fragile space where you can learn, grow, and set stones for beautiful friendships and new collaborations.

Be self-critical, be open and ready to share, mold these 7 days into what you want to discuss... What are your topics? What are your questions? Doubts? What are your daily struggles? This is your Atelier, the mentors are here for you. They will guide you but they will also respect you and your freedom. You also have a responsibility in this and you will need to engage yourself to direct this atelier in the way you want.

And that is exactly what art is about also, because we should not forget the basis we all work from 'art and the artists' as the quote of Bernard refers to. Art shows us different realities. It shows us beauty, it is fragile, breakable, it speaks for itself, art shows us that everything is changeable, that nothing is fix. It shows us pain but also hope. And it connect us to our being human, it questions, it makes us think, it lets us fantasize, it inspires. It makes us political.

And we need to be political. You are all people who will be able to influence the landscape in the coming years. What is your vision? What would the world look like if you had a magic wand? However small or big your festival or venue is, you have a platform to act and react from and to create a space for beauty, for inspiration, for questioning values, for human encounter. Use it!

We don't know what the future will bring, and many things are not under control. This September I was a the Theaterfestival, a festival taking place in Brussels where the European Festivals Association is based, and which makes a selection of the best theatre work of Belgium and the Netherlands, where a powerful young woman, Anne Breure, running a venue in the Netherlands did the opening speech. She had received 3 times less the money she needed to run her venue and decided to only do 1/3 of the programme, opening what she called the 100-day House. Only 100 days long the venue would be operative, the rest of the time the lights would be out. She reminded me of a quote of Virginia Woolf 'The future is dark and this is the best thing the future can be'.

For Woolf the darkness stands for not knowing what is to come, for the uncertainty of what the future will bring. For a darkness that created room for fantasy, for new things, for darkness where there is room to make love, where new thoughts can originate...exactly because we don't see it, because we don't know it. If you think all will be fine no matter what, that justifies doing nothing. But this uncertainty, this darkness leaves room to act.

Today we wanted to change the world as well, as we wanted to give now the floor to a very special guest, first speaker of the global south in the atelier who unfortunately did not make it here today. No-one said to change something is easy. And changing things takes time. Ismail Mahomed, Director of the Market Theatre Johannesburg and host of the first atelier in Africa said about this: "23 years ago the EU lifted its sanctions against South Africa. 24 years later I'm delighted to announce that next year (the 25th anniversary of this diplomatic action, the first ever EU funded Atelier for Young Festival Managers to be presented on the African continent will take place at the Market theater. It will not take 24 years but only 6 months when we are in Johannesburg!"

Arts festival give us the opportunity to use creative expressions to engage with the politics of our world. Through our music, dance, poetry, songs, visual arts, theatre, film and other genres we speak about the same subjects that politicians and economists talk about in their political chambers and boardrooms respectively. While they speak essentially about power and their role in it we speak for the people who are disempowered and for the people who emerge as victors from their circumstances. Our voice as artists is a celebration of the human spirit in all its forms. Our voice as artists is the mirror through which society both hears itself and sees itself. It is the images that we draw through our vivid imaginations that promotes understanding between peoples and which ultimately inspires governments to better understand each other. Through our theatres, galleries, museums, libraries and cinemas we document the hopes, fears, aspirations, experiences, disappointments, failures, pain and anguish of our communities. These spaces are the heartbeats through which our communities live.

Unfortunately, across the globe we are witnessing that as political, economic and religious ideologies battle for their positions the arts and artists are increasingly becoming the soft targets. During the years of apartheid rule in South Africa, the Nationalist Party government banned artists and their work but the resilience of the artists was driven by a unifying slogan that culture is a weapon of the struggle.

When the government tried to shut down exhibitions in our museums they tried to make us lose our memories. They did not succeed! Our artists and curators found new ways of documenting our memories.

When they tried to stop us from singing and dancing they tried to destroy our souls. They did not succeed! Our songwriters, singers, choreographers and dancers found new ways of rejuvenating our souls.

When they tried to stop us from performing our plays they tried to deprive us of our right to imagination. When they tried to ban our poetry and burn our books they were trying to take our voices. They did not succeed! What they learnt all the time is that voice and imagination of the artist can never be silenced. It re-emerges even stronger after any attempt to silence it.

Simply termed as “Cultural Diplomacy”, the free exchange of cultural experiences and expressions between different nations is an integral form of soft power which relies on the ability to persuade, inform, educate and to combat ignorance about the other.

To conclude we would like to thank the co-organisers, the Center for China Shanghai International Arts Festival (CSIAF), its President Ms. Catherine J. Wang, the vice President Mr. Gong and the whole team with Dana, Emily, Zoe, Izzy and others, for their work and collaboration to make this Atelier possible. Special thanks goes to all the local partners who allow us an insight into the diverse cultural scene of Shanghai; to all public institutions which contribute to the development of the young festival and cultural generation; as well as to our outstanding festival and cultural leaders who have shown perpetual enthusiasm for the Atelier for many years. Last but not least, we would like to thank Hugo De Greef, who has been guiding the Atelier since its beginning. We are looking forward to the next seven days in China, to discover its artistic and cultural life, to broaden our skills, and overall to get inspired by one another!

Inge Ceustermans, Shanghai, 17 October 2017