

Merano 2017

« Car le vrai rôle d'un festival est d'aider les
artistes à oser, à entreprendre des projets... »
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Atelier for Young Festival Managers 17 - 23 November 2017

Keynote speech by Ms. Marta Keil

Curator, dramaturg and researcher – Poland

Selection and elaboration of the major questions raised.

Opening Ceremony of the Atelier for Young Festival Managers Merano 2017

17 November, Merano, Italy

Who does the festival belong to?

1. The role and position of the performing arts festival

The festival:

- Not only presents the works of artists, but it also frequently produces and promotes them as well;
- It is an intermediary between the artist and the audience;
- It co-creates and actively shapes the critical discourse accompanying artistic praxis (catalogues, translations, publishing series, thematic books, etc.), thus actively influencing the ways of thinking about theatre and dance, and participating in setting out the directions in which these develop;
- Puts in place a certain way of perceiving performing arts;
- It defines individual trends and sets the course for the development of theatre and dance;
- It arranges artworks in a certain order;
- It establishes artist hierarchy and determines the requirements and criteria for producing new shows: being featured in a festival programme is a definite boost to an artist's standing: her work is exposed to a wider, often international, circle of curators, which may lead to subsequent invitations and offers of producing new shows. It is difficult to overestimate the role of festivals on the performing arts circuit: especially in dance, where adequate infrastructural support has yet to be found. Given the insufficient numbers of dance houses and choreographic centers, for many choreographers, the festival is the main opportunity to present their work and meet their audiences;
- Creates the context: shows a production in a certain context, to an audience attached to a specific location, in conjunction with a selection of other productions and (frequently, though not always) set against a theme or motto specified by curators, has a strong impact on how a given production will be interpreted and received, and thus may determine the author's career path.

The festival thus takes responsibility for the practices of individual artists, for the way their work is perceived, and for the form taken by a given art field.

2. The notion of curator's / programmer's choice

Meanwhile, when it comes to festivals, the category of choice is key. For one thing, the choice of a given artist may determine her subsequent career path: the fact that her work is shown at a festival is a form of recognition and legitimisation of her artistic practice. But the rules curators follow as they make their choices remain unintelligible to artists and audiences alike. Rabih Mroué tackled this issue, enumerating questions to which he did not know the answer, even though they are relevant to his own circumstances as an artist and his standing in the art world:

[H]ow do curators go about securing funds? And what is required from them in return? On what basis do the sponsors agree? On what basis do the curators agree? And once the money is spent and we take our fee, what do they have to prove to their sponsors? How do agendas function? What is the reason for focusing on one region of the world rather than another, on one topic rather than another? Why do we get invited one day, and forgotten about the next? How do these things work? What plays the bigger part: politics, ideologies, culture, propaganda, market strategies, or all of these at once? And who has the biggest influence? Curators or sponsors?¹

The choices made by those responsible for festival programmes are definitely not 'innocent' or neutral, quite on the contrary: they remain embroiled in the social and political context:

- Curators' choices often depend on the local context (the work of a given artist will have a different meaning when shown in Lublin, another in Kiev, still another in Bochum: in each of these locations, audiences, artists' circles, needs and interests are all different). In each instance, whether a project comes to fruition and is successful depends on careful insight into the local environment and its needs.
- Grant-awarding bodies and their preferred (at times imposed) thematic fields and areas of activity remain an equally strong determinant (disabled people can be in the spotlight of stage patronage on one occasion, only to be completely marginalized by set grant programmes on another; Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus and other countries of the so-called Eastern Partnership, a Polish-led EU initiative governing the Union's relationship with post-Soviet states, have for years been the focus of government attention in Poland – only to cede their priority status to other geopolitical areas in the twinkling of an eye).

We need to bear in mind that the choice of a given current is never universal and legitimate of itself: after all, outlining the scope of a given sphere invariably entails leaving some areas beyond the freshly outlined borders.

Having that in mind, I'd like to propose a notion of the festival as not only institution, but also a political institution:

- Because of its very presence in the public sphere whose structure it either reflects or shapes, by creating or changing perceptions;
- Because of its impact on establishing artistic and social relations and practices: after all the very act of selection, and deciding how productions are shown, is in itself a political gesture – as is the shaping of context or formulating the festival message in conjunction with the audience;
- The very notion of the festival is neither universal, neither neutral nor politically 'innocent': it has been created by some people in the certain context and therefore it has never been neutral or free from political or economic determinants.

¹ See: Rabih Mroué, At Least One-third of the Subject, "Frakcija Performing Arts Journal: Curating Performing Arts", 55 (2010), p. 88.

As Sonja Lavaert puts it:

*Social institutions are projects that are being realized, imagination that is being tested in reality [...]. Institutions — both concrete organizations with their buildings, funds, directors and budgets, and the regimes with their value system and procedures — create a general space for the benefit of private subjects. The notion of ‘institution’ presupposes general rules, but these rules are always invented, made and imposed by people, which is precisely where they differ from natural laws. At one time they originated in the brain of the individual; they have not always been there. (Sonja Lavaert, ‘Bartleby’s Tragic Aporia’, in *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, ed. Pascal Gielen (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2013), p. 118.)*

In our five years long experience of co-curating with Grzegorz Reske the Konfrontacje Festival in Lublin, we were attempting to understand the festival as the public art institution. We were aiming to see what would be the impact of situating the festival in the space of public institutions of art, how it would affect its tasks, role, and duties, given in particular the ongoing debate on the situation and mission of public theatre.

There are some clearly defined duties of the festival and the responsibility of its organisers both to the artists and the audience, on the local and the international level:

- The endless searching of new, original ways of formulating and understanding theatrical language, as well as developing a discourse which would enable the artists and the audience to talk.
- Festivals should provide artists with the conditions in which they can work and develop their practice and to stimulate the free flow of people, works, concepts and ideas.
- Festivals are responsible for discovering new phenomena, movements, ways of thinking and producing the arts, as well as becoming open to ever larger and more diverse groups of audiences.
- A festival should create the space for independent exchange of thoughts and experiences, offering artists and their public room and time to think, to experience, to talk.
- It should leave however additional space for unexpected encounters, coincidences – and clashes.

During these five years we have been attempting to enlarge the festival’s activity on a year-long basis and to focus our resources on the residencies, not necessarily leading to new theatre or dance productions as a result.

In the programme, we have been combining the international guest performances with local ones, giving the artists opportunities not only to show their work, but also to rehearse new productions. We have been trying to support the discourse by translating books and texts, by inviting students from different cities for the Festival Campus. But most of all, we have been aiming to invite artists for as long as they could, offering them place to stay and time to share – with no obligations. Of course, in a way this policy goes against the usual understanding of the notion of a festival, which is based on the events. While implementing our strategy in the context of culture institutions in Lublin, we often had to confront the different approaches to the way in which the festival shall develop – which is absolutely natural. But there is always a point where you realise compromises are no longer possible – otherwise you give up your vision.

In my own practice as a curator, I have frequently been forced to cope with unwanted compromise that would enable the festival to survive (for instance, the decision to bring in an expensive production by a well-known artist that would consume a vast share of the budget, may enable us to show works by several less well-known artists, and provide a fine context for presenting their work). In cases like these, compromise is dangerous in that it can lead, to a lesser or greater degree, to self-censorship, whether conscious or not). From my point of view, the work of a curator is always, to an extent, a kind of balancing between: between artists and audiences, local and international context, the perspective of local authorities, institutional interests and one’s own intuition, and the struggle to remain consistent in one’s choices. Asked how to keep one’s footing on this extremely wobbly line, tugged at from all sides, I would be at a loss to answer.

As I work on a programme and take responsibility for a festival as a public institution, I nonetheless endeavour in each instance to remain fully aware of why the work of a given artist is shown in this particular place and time; I try to answer the question what meaning this production has when set against this artist's other works, and what ends such a comparison is to serve.

It is no accident that the major questions asked in *Curator's Piece* – a production that takes curator's practice as its theme – are as follows:

*Artists or audiences - who do you serve? How many artists you present earn same or more than you do? How much does coming from your local context to influence your program? How often do you program friends? Did you ever had an affair with an artist you programmed? Have you ever destroyed an artists' career? How many times did you make artist cry? Do you think you have a lot of power? How much does coming from your local context to influence your program?*²

3. And how to make a festival under the regime of neoliberal nationalism?

Questioning the notion of public art and artistic freedom and asking whom does the art and its institution belongs to is very much present in the public debate at the moment, mainly as a consequence of several attempts of censorship and thanks to the discussion raised after the opening of „The Curse” by Oliver Frljić at Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw³ — but this is just one thing. The other topics, such as working conditions, existing hierarchies and power relations are not so welcome at the moment. The current political scene in Poland, radically cross-cut by divisions which seem increasingly less likely to be overcome, considerably hinders the debate around the performing-arts field: the debate around Oliver Frljić and his show at Teatr Powszechny is a perfect proof. It unveils just one aspect of the discussion on the institution, questioning the notion of public art and artistic freedom and asking whom the art and its institution belongs to. The other topics, such as working conditions, existing hierarchies and power relations are not so welcome at the moment. Raising controversial subjects that might turn out to be a bone of contention in the theatrical milieu and lead to new divisions is highly unwelcome. It concerns a.o. the question of payroll, internal relations within the institution, subjectivity of creators and co-creators of performances – suggesting that puts one at risk of community ostracism, contempt, and ridicule. And in my opinion meanwhile there are no questions that are more crucial. I am convinced that nowadays one cannot practice political or critical theatre without discussing the methods and modes of production and the subsequent consequences for workers – always with reference to the context of late capitalism and its mechanisms, within which we operate.

The current political context:

Challenges you are faced with as art worker in the current political and economic context in Poland:

- You need to explain more and more if and why you invite any political art works and are confronted with such questions as: „how many percent of your programme will be political?.”
- So, you start to learn how to find alternative ways of explaining and naming your work. But how long can you play with the language imposed by power without incorporating it?

² Tea Tupajic, Petra Zanki, *The Curator's Piece. A Trial Against Art*, <http://18.konfrontacje.pl/en/the-curators-piece-2/> [accessed: 10 July 2017].

³ The case is being described at the 2017 issue of „Polish Theatre Journal”, see: <http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/article/view/115/566>

- If working internationally used to be perceived as a value, it is not anymore. And unfortunately this concern does not come from the need to balance the local and international in the programme, which I personally find crucial. It is rather about making Poland great again.
- You start to observe how, slowly, the official language of the government is being incorporated by your colleagues, by people who used to stand on your side of the barricade; eventually you start to realise how this language is being, consciously or not, influencing yourself – and your choices.
- Any attempt to look critically at the way the art institutions work becomes pretty complicated and ambiguous: because we need to protect them. Because it is so auto thematic and dull, because why get involved. Because suddenly the space for opposition ceases to be obvious, the adversary clearly defined and, with relief, placed at the opposite end of the political scene. Because why talk about it, there are other and more important problems. If the left wing is not even present in the polish parliament nowadays, how can you point out the patriarchy of the leftist theatre makers? Don't you have other things to worry about?

4. And where is the way out?

- Anti-heroic strategies, weak resistance;
- Questioning what seems obvious, problematizing what is taken for granted. Protecting an art institution means also a self-reflected and critical analysis on its mode of working, its structures, frames and relations with the artists and the audience;
- Discuss, think and find new ways of solidarity between artists, audiences and art institutions, on the local and international level;
- Disobey the flow;
- And what if...? (fiction as a political tool);

Marta Keil, Merano November 2017