

Some Reflections on the Future of Festival Practice in Europe

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After many years participating in meetings of festival directors, an interesting thing that can often be observed is that even after days of serious discussion one can be hard pushed to find a common denominator between them. An easy conclusion? Festivals differ from each other; even if they share the same artistic discipline or specialism within a discipline or sometimes even the same artists, the environments in which festivals operate are different so that they defy easy comparisons. From this perspective a primary benefit of meetings of festival organisers is that they may provide participants with a reality check which may validate their claims to uniqueness. This is not to suggest that such meetings are therefore of limited value for festival directors and other professionals. On the contrary, the more festivals have to fight for funding, the more they need objective legitimacy, and that legitimacy is often derived from dialogue between festival directors.

This chapter will therefore focus on the legitimacy issue for those festivals that depend on taxpayers' money and which are now faced with the prospect of diminishing support from public bodies, ministries, regional and local governments, less appreciation from taxpayers and more and more competition from alternative leisure-oriented goods and services. Already, many festivals which began during a period of stronger public support for arts and cultural activity are indicating that the earlier prestige associated with professional cultural products has diminished (the art for art's sake paradigm). And that nowadays financial sustainability can only be achieved through a demonstration of the role that culture and in particular festivals can play in society (the instrumentation paradigm).

Beyond cultural diplomacy

History reveals the important role that festivals have played as part of a country's cultural diplomacy. There is no doubting that *Avignon*, *Salzburg* and

Edinburgh have contributed massively to the national image and profile of France, Austria and Scotland abroad. These festivals simply cannot change that by-product of their existence (and why would they want to?). Although cultural diplomacy is par excellence a mutual activity between states; as a rule it does not include communication with citizens except as recipients, this form of (foreign) cultural policy raises the question of whether policy for culture is still the best instrument to highlight the role of the state as the representative body of the citizens – and not just for the benefit of citizens from other countries, but of its own citizens too. The representative function of art, after all, lies in sublimating the relation between the state and its citizens. Within this perspective, citizenship is a privilege that cannot be enjoyed outside the boundary of the national state. State-subsidised culture is intended to stimulate, reinforce or at least arouse a national feeling in its citizens – their sense of identity. In a situation of this kind, arts institutions, the state and its citizens are caught up in a symbiotic relationship of mutual dependence on one another, an ongoing process of showing, presenting, producing and consuming national values and myths.

Pure enjoyment of art is not excluded, but is rather a by-product of a construct of this kind. The embedding of a festival policy into the process of fabricating a national cultural identity ensures that the relationship between the state and its citizens acquires a (cultural) added value, which in turn may justify the expenditure of taxpayers' money on prestigious arts festivals.

Subsidised artistic expressions are no longer necessary to determine identity

This symbiosis is now in danger of coming to an end. The nation state is no longer the main source of its citizens' personal and cultural identity. Rights, obligations and services are becoming valid and applicable in all the member states of the Union, and that includes citizens of the other 27 member states. This calls into question the role of art as the route for citizens to identify with a nation and its culture. The fact that the latest austerity measures have had particular impact on the national culture budgets of many member states without much opposition from their citizens seems to indicate that the traditional bonds between state, arts institutions and public have been weakened. One response to this is to focus critical attention on the need to re-evaluate the relationship of culture with politics, and its relationship with civil society too. But in so doing this is not a call to return to the relationships of the 20th century.

Reorientation

One outcome of present change and the spending cuts is to make people realise that splendid isolation has its drawbacks. Moreover, that we actually require a review and potentially a reorientation of the role that arts institutions, and festivals in particular, play in society.

What is called for is a deepening of the relationship with the citizen rather than a restoration of the ties to the state. Citizens are looking for coherence, meaning, togetherness and a prospect for the future. These are not available in the supermarket or from the desks of government offices. And we also need to recognise the extent to which globalisation and digitisation have left their mark on the younger generation. Desperate attempts by some political and religious leaders to praise forms of orthodoxy as an automatic guarantee of happiness cannot prevent the fact that transnationalism and the mobility of commodities, services, ideas, customs and insights have become the norms for the local and national orientation of maturing individuals. Understanding their own situation is a prerequisite we need to encourage in these individuals. Some festivals have already realised that historical and cultural context is important as well as the provision of content; important with respect to the festival's capacity to add value to society through reflecting on its past as well as its current context.

So a reorientation by a festival to its political and social context can no longer be postponed, first of all to that of European citizenship. Some of those in the arts sector see the festival as an excellent instrument for cultivating citizenship¹. An official step towards a broad promotion of active citizenship and the involvement of the arts world in it is a 2007 publication of the Netherlands Council for Culture² (hereafter: Council), the official advisory body to the government in the field of culture. This document was the first in the institutionalised and subsidised arts world to speak of role and responsibilities in civil society. In the recommendation to the government the Dutch arts world was called upon to take a broader and longer term view of the future than the continued existence of specific institutions. This was when the Council introduced the notion of 'cultural citizenship'.

The Council called for more attention to be paid to the role of the individual, the relationship between past, present and future, meaning and depth, and called upon the arts world to operate in an interdisciplinary and international way that transcended sectoral boundaries. This anticipated the possible development of alliances with other partners in the fields of education, science, the world of industry and commerce and social organisations.