

Listener's Reflection

In response to 'Planning in the face of uncertainty' International Webinar

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'Watching the great revolving spokes'ⁱ: Festivals, COVID19 and Planning for Uncertainty

Festival making is a cross-artform practice that has been deeply impacted by COVID19. Not only has it been effected by social distancing measures and guidelines on assembly in public, it has been impacted by restrictions on international travel. To better tailor support for the sector, the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaion charged Dr David Teeven with producing a series of virtual gatherings for Irish festival makers to share the challenges and learning that has been a part of the 2020 season. On 2 July, Dr Teeven extended that conversation to include international festival makers with a focus of planning in the face of uncertainty. The international festivals webinar brought together about 50 festival makers and artists that work in a festival context from Ireland, UK, continental Europe, Canada and North Africa. In some ways this built on the Change Makers conference organised by Karl Wallace, Dr Teevan and Dr Niamh NicGhabhann in February 2020.

I want to work through my observations of this webinar through a discussion of value. In times of uncertainty, we turn to the arts. We turn to them for many reasons, but a driving one is because of the value they have had in our lives in times of crisis. Value is evidenced in more than the economic dividend, but it is not outside it. This is true for festival makers, festival goers and the localities in which those festivals appear. As the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaion has stated, festivals are 'central to community exploring and expressing its local identity.'ⁱⁱ This speaks to festivals capacity to strengthen and challenge the bond of belonging, but it is also about the critical role festivals play in local economies. The economic impact this will have on individual's work and artforms as a whole will be unprecedented. The unprecedented loss of income for artists, in particular performing artists, as a result of COVID19 has been devastating financially and emotionally. The resounding note in the webinar was not about the economic value of festival, however. Festival is an expression of value, or specifically of our values. That 'our' is the assemblage - the curated programme with its complex web of

stakeholder investment - necessary to enact the core mission of the festival. That 'our' is also the community which the festival makes and is made by.

How do we acknowledge our grief for the work we will not create and plan for change at the same time? How do we maintain festival's potential and duty to develop artistic practice individually and communally? To quote one webinar participant, this task asked of the festival maker is Sisyphean. There has been a sense of having to plan for multiple futures or scenarios simultaneously. There is an impact from this on the capacity for collaboration as well as producing work. It also raises questions of how to perform work when travel restrictions may mean the cast may have to be different if performed live. This in turn necessitates developing ideas about practice and how to contribute without a physical presence. In planning for delivery online, there are practical and conceptual challenges requiring new configurations of resources and expertise.

What I heard in all of this is that no matter how demanding this task, there is not a world that exists in which the festival maker will not set out to accomplish it. No matter how many times that rock rolls back down that hill, they are going to start again. This is evidenced in the number of festivals that reshaped themselves in the past months and for the coming months. The boulder that got over the hill may have been through delivery online or in some other extended form, digital and/or analogue. It may also have meant taking a step back, in a sense a slowing down, to redefine purpose and scope what is needed (and possible) in light of conflicting and unfixable guidance on international travel. It involved new ways of working and delivering work, and it will continue to do so as our current moment evolves locally and globally.

Festivals provide meaningful connections between community members within their geographic borders and beyond them, offering a space to reflect and challenge within our shared cultural experiences. The social and communal aspect of festival is a critical element that presents both opportunity and challenges to recreate in the digital sphere. On the one hand, as one participant observed, moving to the online sphere may provide access to a more diverse (or inclusive) audience. On the other hand, it is also dependent on technical skills, resources and infrastructure that compromise equality in participation. There is also an inherent challenge to our understanding of physicality and intimacy for festival that is reflective of the lived experience of this moment.

Our value to each other and our values of how to be in the world with each other have undergone unprecedented change. Value in all its manifestation is not fixed and not stable. What we need, what we value, as a community *in this moment* from festival and from the arts may not be what we valued six months ago. However, there is never any doubt that we value the arts. What we also do not doubt is that we value each other and the moments festivals provide for us to come together to grieve our losses and celebrate our joys.

ⁱ Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (2019) Fastnet in *The Mother House*. Oldcastle: Gallery Press, pg. 55

ⁱⁱ The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon. (2020) Festivals [Online]. Available from:
<http://www.artscouncil.ie/Arts-in-Ireland/Festivals/> [Accessed 5 July 2020]

Dr Sarah Feinstein, July 2020.