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RURAL FESTIVALS AS ARTISTIC LABORATORIES

In this paper, based on research as well as on artistic experience in concrete projects, I would like to explore how different festival concepts and organization models influence artistic outcomes and their reception. I have investigated international co-productions which occurred within three different artistic festivals, where there was opportunity for site specific exploration. I am comparing and analyzing purposes, orientations, levels of freedom of site specific explorations, living conditions of the artists, security measures, economic implications, inclusiveness, personal artistic development, and reflective function at the following festivals: Oerol 2005 programs in the Netherlands, Colina 2004 in Portugal, and Via Pontica 2000-2003 in Bulgaria.

Oerol festival on Terschelling island in the North Sea may have reached cultural overproduction during its 27 years long history. In 2005 it hosted 85 regular performances plus 11 performances for children, and 58 music programs. Colina 2004 was based in a small town (20 000 people) of Montemor-o-novo in Alentejo, the deserted region of Portugal, in a building that used to be a convent, and currently houses a high-tech cultural residence center. Via Pontica took place in a really small (less than 2000 people) village of Yasna Polyana, just 10 km from tourism-undeveloped part of the Black Sea. The village has a historical cultural center and a traditional sculpture biennial, both dedicated to Lav Tolstoy, whose peasants colonized and named this village among 40 others around the globe. Via Pontica created and presented its programs outside these institutional landmarks, producing extraordinary alternative events in a village where even aspects of mainstream culture are hardly visible.

If we seek to recognize purposes of these three festivals, we will find many differences, yet idea of free and explorative artistic work is the common thread. In a highly developed EU country of the Netherlands, a famous and leading international theater festival sets out to organize a seminar on *location theater*, and “The festival gets special funding for mentoring young artists that want to create site-specific performance... every year”^[1]. In not so developed EU country of Portugal things are not so transparent. Colina “aims to be: a laboratory, a playground, a safe haven, a challenging hall, a forum, a place for experimentation, creative intimacy, artistic encounter, change, reflection, taking risks, contamination of languages, crossing of media, future collaborations and even for failure”^[2]. There is not even a word festival in its title! Yet there were project performances, so called Informal COLINA showings that took place several times during the laboratory, as well as a final presentation. Even if Colina was not deemed to be a festival, at least not in a public sense, it was about how artists and people around them were feeling and working (lot of changes, tight schedule, highly vibrant atmosphere...). In Bulgaria, then only a candidate EU member state, Via Pontica set its goals solely towards artistic exploration, thereby reducing all other festival aspects. There were no schedules, no fixed programs, no media, sometime even no audience, except an accidental passerby. Brief festivals which occurred during the transition times in the Balkans gave space to many unusual events that used the title of festival in order to attract public support.

All three festivals described and analyzed here were founded by interdisciplinary artists themselves: Joop Mulder, Rui Horta and Venelin Shurelov. Horta and Shurelov were born in small communities where the festivals happened, while Joop got his idea while working in a bar on the island of Terschelling. Festive orientation that tends to fascinate the audience can be recognized in all three festivals, but in very different contexts. Oerol's 50 000 spectators roam around sand dunes off the coast of the North Sea through 90 performances, emerging in surprising environments and locations during the 9 festival days. Public presentations of Colina, although based on improvisation, are fascinating in a huge jam-session way, with 25 artists, and as many technicians and craftsmen working together with the highest technologies. Via Pontica provoked surprises by changing the environment around the village through mostly ritualistic performances and sometimes enormous landscape art, all created with materials and energies found on site.

Orientation towards education and development of the Oerol festival can be recognized in the fact that small scale street theater and landscape art gatherings became a festival of such international and popular scale. Starting a festival within festival (and naming it seminar since 1998) is not merely developing an educational practice. It's an intelligent investment for the future. Colina's experimental drift made the festival mobile, every time being held in a different location. After two festivals held in Portugal in 2003 and 2004, five more Colinas were held in following two years: Tanzhaus nrw, Düsseldorf (Germany) in August 2005, Dancecity, Newcastle (UK) in April 2006, Kanuti Saal, Tallinn (Estonia) in August 2006, Les Informelles/Les Bernardines Marseille (France) in September 2006, GRAN, Teatre for Dans, Aarhus (Denmark) in December 2006. Although many artists insisted on finishing and publicly presenting their collaborative works, Colina became neither a productive nor a representative project of collaborative works and networks proposed and tested out in Colina but kept its work-in-progress format.

Via Pontica used several strategic moves in order to survive harsh transitional cultural climate. It changed its function from a symposium to a festival and back to a symposium. In the meantime, artists around the festival created Via Pontica Art Group that performed in several festivals (April Meeting in Belgrade 2002 and Varna Summer in 2004) with ten different events.

Presenting and producing were part of all three festivals' concepts and productions. Practical and international seminar at Oerol has given space and time for new and innovative productions that were presented in the festival. Colina was an experiment in piloting international co-productions within a festival concept and organization, with 25 artists, 8 organizers, 11 students of Technical School of Image and Communication, plus 8 technicians, and 17 visitors, 45 documented projects in two weeks and many more project ideas conceptually tested. Via Pontica was essentially about producing and exploring in nature with found materials only. Video, performances and photographs made during Via Pontica were presented in many other festivals, exhibitions and productions.

Levels of site-specific exploration freedom could be compared in all three festivals.

Explorations at Oerol are quite organized. Shrimp fishing, meeting locals, museum tours and many other activities were a habitual part of performance preparations. Colina proposed limited exploration. Inside the convent, explorations were mostly aimed at intertwining the human body of the performer with the digital technologies, while searching for experiences in nature, outside convent, hardly took place. Via Pontica gave and initiated total freedom to explore. Most artists were drawn by the nature, except for a few documentary video recordings of the villagers.

Oerol provided artistic groups with everything to keep them occupied with their work. Cooks and organizers left artists with no worries but to make their performances the best they could. Coordinators of projects took great care to motivate and direct international artists to create, rehearse and perform their works up to six times a day! Colina was a heaven of living conditions: cozy hotel with a swimming pool, technicians and organizers begging artists to address them and employ them. Via Pontica invited their participants in tents and houses full with flees and rats. Total freedom and lack of obligations were paid with almost medieval housing conditions.

Security measures can be a tricky issue. That is one of reasons why these explorative projects were a seminar and not a full festival show. They gave a lot of freedom to do crazy and dangerous performances, such as jumping from a tree to tree over the lying audience without any safety ropes. Colina took more care by forbidding artists to use not so secure rooms in the convent. At Via Pontica security was not an issue at all.

Speaking of ecology, almost no other public can be compared with the Dutch audience of Oerol. More than 45 000 people and no cigarette butts nor bottles thrown around the island. Seemingly, everyone was aware of CO2 emissions, making better use of water and reducing noise pollution.^[3] Although environmentally friendly practices (EFPs) were not yet an urging festival issue at the time, artists showed great understanding of these global concerns. Oerolers even cleaned corners of the island as preparation work for their performances. Colinians ran away from 100 Fahrenheit degree temperatures into cool studios behind thick medieval walls. Via Ponticans used dead trees and stuff found only in nature to work with. And without audience and transportation, their impact on the ecology was minimal, if not positive. Via Pontica as a group even planted 600 acacias in the shape of a labyrinth in Deliblata desert in Serbia, but lack of aftercare by local authorities meant that the young acacia trees were eaten by cows.

Let us now compare economic implications. Oerol 2005 received 2 million euros mainly in public and private subsidies and a smaller part from its main sponsors: beer factory and natural gas giant. Other sponsors and donors were numerous and various: governments on all levels (national, provincial, local), four foundations, several banks and hotels, an internet provider, even a state lottery. A wide range of donors for a diverse audience of the festival. The seminar productions were supported by eight institutions (of which two were foundations and two theater institutes). Colina's budget was 100 000 euros cash which is quite a sum if we consider many service sponsors and almost no need for public presentation and media advertising. Among co-funders were authorities on European, national and municipal level and an art university. International partners were culture

institutions from Europe, such as Tanzhaus nrw, Kanuti Gildi Saal i.e. Support was given by local hotels, rent-a-car, restaurants and national institutes of other countries. Via Pontica was funded with less than 5000 euros by the municipality.

Now we will consider inclusiveness, the impact on audience and local resources. At Oerol, almost everyone in the audience was a tourist. There were no incidental spectators because everyone knew about the festival. Still, roaming around the island can provide you with a feeling that you found something by chance. Art professionals performing at the festival had little opportunity to see performances by other artists. The impact of the festival on a local, mostly agricultural community was huge. All of the 4 500 inhabitants were included in some service for 50 000 visitors, and many people from Terschelling hosted performances in their backyards and fields. Colina included local people in organization as well as many students that had great and hard time working on short term projects with professional artists from many countries. Presentations were held mainly to sponsors and co-producers, and not to a wider audience. In the empty inland of Portugal there are not so many tourists, but professional curators were occasional “Zap visitors” and the only audience for all the ongoing projects. Via Pontica was almost invisible. It was not even clear who was hiding from whom – the artists from the villagers or the villagers from the artists?

All three festivals had no juries. Nevertheless, personal artistic development was the main point of all three festivals. Oerol provided the artists with a high energy of the festival in a beautiful and inspiring place. In the international group of the seminar participants, ego clashes that could jeopardize the production were overcome by letting each artist create own solo. Too much work left little time for other creative exchange. On the other hand, Colina was all about meeting people and creating an exchange. Various tryouts, never fully produced, helped many of the artists challenge their own credos and broaden own personal experience. Via Pontica, with its sense of freedom, gave everyone as much as he or she was willing to accept. Half of 11 artists in Via Pontica now have international careers and three of them work at arts universities. Interpersonal exchange served as a catalyst for several relationships, and later resulted in three marriages of the participating artists.

Reflective practices of Oerol were documented in a big monograph printed in 2001. Unfortunately, it is only in Dutch. Admittedly, the vast majority of the festival audience was Dutch. Oerol web site is very informative but oriented solely to the new festival editions. All records of previous festivals are available online on www.tin.nl, in the production data base that covers the Dutch performing arts throughout a large part of the 20th c. Seminar projects are regularly published as DVDs. During two weeks of Colina 2004, one artist team was making an interactive CD and “Making of” DVD that were finished just one day after the project. All artists’ ideas and suggestions were written down by the festival team. Many artists became suspicious of organizers’ sincere intentions, because of extensive sharing of ideas and producers’ monitoring and documenting the projects tryouts. Via Pontica did not use its reflective tools to survive as a festival nor to document itself. With strong artistic drive, its projects became exhibitions, video art, installations, performances and other artistic projects inspired by

Via Pontica experience.

It is hard to draw any precise conclusion from these very different practices. These are borderline cases: practical and very international, yet very loosely considered seminar at Oerol, Colina as experiment of piloting international co-productions with some elements of festival concept and organization, and Via Pontica as para(sitical) festival. For me, it is even impossible to perceive or understand artworks with the cultural tools used in this analysis. We can expect and hope for even braver practices that would, through experimentation and freedom of artistic research, give new energies and innovate templates of festivals and cultural production.

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