

(“Alles van waarde is weerloos”)

Meet your creative business partners: “Everything of worth is defenseless”

EFA seminar “Get in touch with your creative business partners”

Monday, September 18, 2017

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Ladies and gentlemen festival directors and festival supporters

I was really happy receiving the invitation to address a keynote for your seminar, as it would give me the opportunity to:

- add a new chapter to Ritsaert ten Cates speeches on festivals, of 1997 in Edinburgh and of 2007 (published in the EFFE *Europe for Festivals. The Guide 2015-2016*);
- sharpen my thoughts on the societal responsibilities of festivals, e.g. by expressing my fear about the lack of governance, seeing too many festivals being less and less independent;
- fulfil my strong urge, reading the little booklet *EFA Cahier de l'atelier #2*, to compare the job of a festival director to the one of exhibition/museum curator, and in the midst of the re-opening of the AfricaMuseum, preparing the new permanent exhibit, I wanted to share my ideas about making a museum with your ideas of making a festival, whilst knowing it's all about making artistic and cultural choices.

But then one has to be realistic: I am given 25 minutes, and a topic: "get in touch with your creative business partners".

I am convinced that with today's speakers, you will learn good, nice and practical things about getting in touch with business partners. Let me thus first help you to unlearn some of the things that seem to matter and confront you with some simple questions on value and business. Please allow me to tackle some of the abovementioned issues *en cours de route*.

The business you're in

So let's talk about your business.

What is your business? i.e. what is your value? your added value?

A festival is a gesture. But beware, not a big gesture, not an easy one to read, often also overwhelmed by other gestures:

- like those of the artists, who can reduce your whole festival to that one extraordinary performance,

- or like those of external events (fall of Berlin wall happened, “thanks God” on November 9 1989, 10 days after I finished the Klapstuk 89 dance festival in Leuven).

Also, do never overestimate your gesture: there are many people not participating at your festival and even more not reading your gestures.

Momentum

A festival creates, just like few other instruments in art and culture such as an exhibition, momentum, as Gintautas Kevisas of the Vilnius Festival pointed out on the occasion of 60 years EFA. I agree, I have seen this happen in 1990 in Glasgow and in 1993 in Antwerp, when those cities were *European Capitals of Culture*. And at a much younger age I experienced this, in the early 1980's, discovering contemporary theatre at Hugo De Greefs *Kaaitheaterfestival*, or Pina Bausch in *Festival d'Avignon*. Ritsaert also refers to two festivals as important moments in his life: the *Sunday Times National Union of Students Drama Festival* in Bristol and Jack Langs *Festival Mondial du Théâtre Universitaire de Nancy*. The festival's momentum is made possible by the concentration of time, money, attention, audiences and artists. It has the freedom, like probable the mother of all festivals, i.e. carnival, to set norms and restrictions aside. So in fact it is also a concentration of freedom and independency.

So this is the central idea, and it is very simple: in your festival business, you need to stress the (added) value of your format, of your gesture, of your momentum, and of the artists and programme as well.

The economic value is crucial. Not.

However, being short of arguments or confronted with people that seem not to value your endeavours, you (or if it is not you, your marketing and communication staff, too often like to stress the spin-off values, on local economy, on social effects, on city or neighbourhood regeneration, or even on the mental and physical health of your audiences.

And guess what: the spin-off effects on the local economy, so says the study of the 3rd *What Works Evidence Review on sports and culture*, tend to have not been large and are often zero. (Of course, many other studies say the opposite, those are the ones you and I use towards our governments and funders, but know that in academic literature there are studies saying that

much of the economic impact is overestimated, certainly if you broaden the scope outside your festival location and time span).

Economic impact of culture is zero, concludes report

A team making recommendations to the Government on how public money can be spent most effectively finds the impact of culture projects to be limited in both scope and scale.



Latest news

Independent creative education

Monday, 02 March 2020

The Chair of the Arts Council is questioning "public money" calling for creative education to be recognised as a priority for students to develop their skills more (Telegraph)

Arts leaders call for fairer funding

Friday, 27 February 2020

Two groups of arts bosses have called for a fairer funding system for the arts.

What Works

Evidence Review 3: Sports & Culture

- a systematic review of evaluations of the economic impact of major sporting and cultural events and facilities.
- Overall, the evidence suggests that the measurable economic effects on local economies tend not to have been large and are often zero. Facilities, however, can have a small positive impact on property prices nearby.
- This should not overshadow the other real if difficult-to-measure benefits of hosting sport and cultural activities.

Indeed, I have read too many pleas by cultural organisations and festivals (sometime with false arguments) on economic value, tourist value, experience value, ... as if the intrinsic value is inexistent. I teach at a faculty of applied economics (in Antwerp) and one of the first things I have to explain my students, eager for recipes to develop cultural entrepreneurial partnerships and businesses, is that there are besides the **market** (with qualifications like *demand and purchasing power* and its evaluation method of *price*) also other orders of worth. French sociologists Boltansky and Thévenot listed them (*De la justification: les économies de la grandeur*, 1991):

- the **industrial** worth, with human qualifications such as *professionalism, competences, expertise*, evaluated in terms of *productivity and efficiency*
- the **opinion** worth, qualified by *celebrity* and evaluated in terms of *renown*
- the **civic** worth, qualified by *equality* and evaluated in terms of *collective interest*
- the **domestic** worth, qualified by *authority* and evaluated in terms of *esteem and reputation*

- the **inspired** worth, qualified by *creativity and ingenuity* and evaluated in terms of *grace, nonconformity and creativeness*.

Besides these orders of worth, I am convinced that the arts, and festivals, need to stress more their intrinsic and per definition not measurable values and should not compare their activities and performance to other festival-like events like sports or touristic attractions – although they as well have intrinsic values – but to activities that are related to other highly intrinsic value activities, such as religion, love, friendship, ... The reason is, as pointed out by Pascal Gielen and others of the University of Groningen (The Netherlands) who delivered in 2014 the research report ‘The Value of Culture’ that “Art as the domain where a certain dismeasure is still being cultivated, is one of the few places within modern society where just about every measure (be it economic, political, ethical or medical) can be questioned”.

Art is important
because it creates a
dismasure - its value is
unmeasurable

‘the common factor of dis-measure or
chaos now gives art its power’
Rancière, *Le destin des images* (2003)



DE WAARDE VAN CULTUUR

Pascal Gielen
Sophie Elkhuisen
Quirijn van den Hoogen
Thijs Lijster
Hanka Otte

ONDERZOEKSCENTRUM ARTS IN SOCIETY
RIJKSUNIVERSITEIT GRONINGEN

rijksuniversiteit
groningen

Or: “The core business of cultural sectors everywhere in Europe is to design and give meaning to ways of living together”.

A value that cannot be measured, reminds many of us, Dutchspeaking Europeans, of a line in a poem from 1954, by Dutch poet Lucebert. For a long time, this line could be seen when arriving with the train in Rotterdam,

on the building of an insurance company: *Alles van waarde is weerloos, Everything of worth is defenceless.*

De zeer oude zingt:

er is niet meer bij weinig
noch is er minder
nog is onzeker wat er was
wat wordt wordt willoos
eerst als het er is is het ernst
herinnert zich heilloos
en blijft ijlings

alles van waarde is weerloos
wordt van aanraakbaarheid rijk
en aan alles gelijk

als het hart van de tijd
als het hart van de tijd

Lucebert, uit *Verzamelde gedichten*,
De Bezige Bij, 2002 (eerst gepubliceerd: 1954)

The very old one sings:

there is not more in little
nor is there less
still is uncertain what was
what is to be will be will-less
first when it is it is serious
fruitless it recollects itself
and stays in great haste

everything of worth is defenceless
grows rich from touchability
and equal to everything

like the heart of time
like the heart of time

Translated by Diane Butterman, 2011

Festivals and festivalization: a catch 22?

Now that we have repeated what is evident, let us tackle another issue related to your business, a catch 22 like dichotomy.

You are experts in providing experiences, but too often I read you have to learn and apply the tricks of experimental marketing (a blend of the realms of the esthetical, the escapist, the educational and the entertainment) to your festivals. *But do we really have the capacity of living constantly with memorable experiences?*

Put otherwise: you are masters in making art festive, but you have no answer to the “festivalization” of everything (life is not a festival, at most it is a series of seasons); we know how to provide to audiences things that are cool, *but we do not have an answer to ‘all must be cool’?*

Furthermore: we are terribly concerned about the world and yet we feel that our messages (and those of our artists presented or produced) are but

a tiny thing in a much bigger world, often not more than a recognition or translation/positioning of a problem, not a solution; and often only shared with a few hundred or thousand co-citizens.

Ideologies that help?

What is the way out? Some of us use deep-rooted ideology to find a way out. These are the two dominant ones:

- One option is to be liberal, which is in these days: neo-liberal. Freedom is utmost important and the free market is its working ground. Transparency, free speech, disruption, innovation, development, are the drivers for attaining a better world, for everybody. This ideology is really deep-rooted: even Ritsaert ten Cate quotes Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead*, a book that is seen today as a neo-liberal manifesto! The avant-garde artist should indeed be as free and thus as selfish as possible, selfish for getting the possibilities to make the greatest art of all times. The festival is a format which fits very well in this disruptive, innovative discourse: it is the equivalent of the trade fair, a high concentration of things that different stakeholders should see, and artists, audience, press, intellectuals, politicians, etc. come there and celebrate (it is festive!). From within this ideology, we do seminars on ... getting in touch with creative business partners. Now,
 - some of us are afraid of the end result of this neo-liberal ideology: can economic growth be endless? can it (and its selfish nature) be always good and better for everybody? and who is everybody? Our co-citizens? the inhabitants of our European realm? Africans and people in other continents as well? the children of our children? and their children?
 - more of us are worried about the short term effect of neo-liberalism. I am talking of the effect on your own festival business, which is less subsidy or more commercial approach in programming. I hear you say things like "We can have more proper income and somehow less subsidy, but we still need the subsidy, as leverage for more entrepreneurship". We even compare our art industry with other subsidized industries (steel and coal, energy, football, start-ups, ...). We repeat that the creative industry in Scotland is more important than that of its whiskies, or that in Germany it is the third biggest industry, behind cars and machine industry, but ahead of the chemistry industry, ... In fact, whenever there is a malfunction (we are aware of the burn-outs, the new poor, the evaporation of the public realm), we embrace

innovative, disruptive solutions. New citizenship, co-creation, small scale city agriculture, ... And also, little by little we lose track of the meaning of words: we accept words like 'clients' in stead of 'audiences', 'products' in stead of 'art works', 'market' or 'industry' in stead of 'sector' or 'field', 'exchange (of ideas)' in stead of 'sharing' or 'dialoguing', ...;

- Another ideological option is, what I call, to be multicultural, decolonial, engaged , ...: Egalité and fraternité are more important here. We acknowledge that throughout history there has been a system of oppression. We are, even today, without intention, maybe even unconsciously, still imposing this oppression. We are aware of our euro-centrism. In line with thinkers like Habermas, Bourdieu and Foucault we understand how the system itself reinforces the distinctions between the 'superior' and the 'inferior' and we use all our energies and capacities to criticize this. We strive for political correctness; we feel guilty about the past and even about the present, so we are open, open minded, working towards a utopian state of a world equal for all. We are anti-racists and understand that racism is deep-rooted, in fact goes far beyond making differences based on race: it is about installing superiority as a hidden source code in our society. Again, also here, we are afraid of the outcome:
 - on the long term: how to maintain what we believe to be of great worth? can we continue to safeguard our private wealth by claiming our privacy and freedom of speech, freedom of place to live, freedom of choice of religion, freedom of choice of school to send our children to?
 - and here too we are worried about the short term effects of giving in on our supremacy mechanisms: we say we 'need time', we refer to our circumstances that are different (*look at me, having not all but quite some power in deciding on how we are going to represent the past, present and future relations between Belgium and Central-Africa, as a pars pro toto for the relationships between Europe and Africa: why me and not some person from African descend? why we, white Belgians and not people to whom our collection and heritage belongs 'more' ? who are we to claim that we are the best in safeguarding the universal value of this collection?*). And so, we temper the far reaching enthusiasm about 'sharing and caring' by playing the game 'along the rules of democratic processes', 'long talks', 'negotiations', 'exceptions because of the circumstances', etc. In the mean time, our artists and audiences remain white, the only difference is that it is not intended to be so.

A third view on ideologies that drive our decisions, opinions and fears is more apocalyptic: it is (1) the disappearance of our ideologies-as-values. It is the fear that one day we will all be independent mini entrepreneurs, with corporations and/or algorithms deciding for us how to be a player in the game of the free. Or, (2) in conjunction or in opposition to this worldwide algorithmocracy or corporatocracy, we fear that in fact yes, we in the west, even being anti-racist and open-minded and so on, will effectively be losing our wealth and superiority in a 21st century that will be characterized by mass mobility of poor people (from other continents), revolutions and civil wars.

Escape from the paradoxes

We are far from the value-discussion and how to make creative business partnerships. Or not? What do we value most, is in fact the crucial question here.

A typical solution for the paradoxes I tried to squeeze into your mind (neo-liberal or multicultural), is to find a third way. It can be a philosophical, Hegelian synthesis, a Baricco-ian paradigm-shift-realism (referring to Alessandro Baricco's book *The Barbarians*), or something in the middle, which I will call 'slightly conservative pragmatism'.

- Lets skip the philosophical synthesis, ...
- as it might resemble to the paradigm shift we could or should learn to embrace. Here is the way out of the realists. The commodification of festivals on the one side and the festivalization of great parts of our culture on the other side have become a common mode of understanding what is happening in our times. We should accept this. It is promoted as a new kind of economy, following the coining of it in *Harvard Business Review* by Pine and Gilmore in 1998 as 'experience economy'. It is criticised as an example of neo-liberal glorification and phantasmagorical obsession with the free market. Alessandro Baricco would probably refer to the phenomenon as a paradigm shift caused by the 'new barbarians'. As an observer, Baricco does not want to judge this (r)evolution as positive or detrimental: it is a fact that things change. Whereas Ritsaert ten Cate in his two texts on festivals and specifically in his 2007 one seems to be a culture pessimist, Baricco is a realist. The pessimist describes a shift as a decline – hope has to be found in some fundamental values that will survive: quality, engagement, endeavour,

etc. The realist describes the shift as a fundamental change, just like the one from e.g. classicism into romanticism. The values transform as such. Quality, engagement and endeavour get another content: broader instead of deeper, concrete instead of abstract, shared instead of authentic. What we see around us is nothing less exciting than this transformation at work. The way things change. Some things, thought to be utmost human, will be replaced by other things, which we can hardly imagine. It's a transition and we, artistic entrepreneurs can accommodate the transition and use our festive momentum with the help of artists, who are good at imagining the unimaginable.

- Or let's be pragmatists. Let us stop reflecting endlessly and just do things. By doing things, we change things. I have a t-shirt with a Jenny Holzer phrase saying 'Action causes more trouble than thought'. That is why our pragmatism must be conservative. Slightly conservative. We will act gradually, we will embrace small changes, things that will have a long term effect maybe. We have learned to live the way we live, we have learned to like it and hate it. We understand that change might be necessary (and we will not stop indicating the need for change, the manifest lack of justice, equality, freedom, fraternity, understanding, ...), but we also know how change impacts people and lives, often in aspects that have not been foreseen or surely have been underestimated. You are privileged pragmatists, as you have a tool at hand that can function exactly at the intersection of change and the society: the momentum of the festival.

And thus, you create with your festivals safe havens for new ideas and experiments. You embrace biological urban farming, watching the sunset as a part of a festival program (as is the case for more than ten years now at the festival Zomer van Antwerpen), performances of 24-hours duration, installations that play with the distinctions between artist and audience, etc. etc. not because you are naïve and want to do your part to change the world (as a kind of social corporate responsibility as it is called in the neo-liberal paradigm), but because you want to create moments in your visitors and audiences minds and lives where pragmatic possibilities can be, yes, experienced (cfr. the etymological closeness of experience and experiment, both come from the Latin word *experiri*, which means trying, testing). Where change is a constant possibility.

Which means: the value of a festival can be measured by how you put your values into practice. Your true values that is, those that are part of your

mission and DNA. That is a hell of a job and you'd better have only a few real ones to take care of instead of many hollow ones.

Now, how to get this in touch with your business partners?

Well, define your business. Please, don't come and tell me you're in the business of selling live music to audiences, or theatre or film or whatever. You are in the business of creating real value for the society and you will need to define that society and that value.

- The business of learning to listen to things unheard, e.g.;
- The business of believing in the universality of art and beauty, found in its different and most local and exceptional outings;
- The business of creating hope when nobody seems to know, despite so many say to know;
- The business of sharing things gone by;
- The business of creating space for change and experiment, ...

You might find partners in companies in other sectors that are striving for the same values. Some of them might see interest in sharing some of their assets with you, as you clearly want to share assets with them or with their society of clients. Most will have different business values, or will be unable to share their assets, being busy with their own business. Fair enough.

You might also profit from the combination of your side effects with theirs. Your thrilling experiences for their dull lives (but dull lives are becoming scarce, just like unique thrilling experiences), your hungry or thirsty audiences for their food and drinks, your happy and naïve audiences that like their products because you endorse them, or the aura of your artists and (inner) crowds that are within reach for the sponsors and their relations.

Now you probably will expect me to warn you, not to mingle side effects with the real stuff. I am, but only partly, because, there are some side effects or by-products that are very valuable. The Norwegian philosopher Jon Elster has brilliantly explained why some by-products are of great value, as they are able to get results only as a by-product, because the item of value is *essentially* a by-product. A successful party, a good talk, a love between persons that grows deep: these are all very important values in life that, in Elsters words, cannot-be-willed, because they fundamentally must have the chance to fail. In spite of all the how-to manuals for organizing parties that thrill, for finding love-partners that fit, for festivals that work or business partnerships that are creative, once you pursue them (too much, too

bluntly) as a manageable *goal*, they will not work. When I say to my lover that I give her flowers because I know that by doing so she will most probably like me more, I miss the point of giving flowers, which is expressing my love for her. That she will like me more afterwards, is a state that is essentially a by-product of my action, not a goal of it.

So let me recapitulate. Your mission defines the values you want to pursue. Some of these values are societal: they are about 'a better world'. Your festival is a momentum, a safe haven for getting the possibility of thinking about a better world in the minds of your audiences and stakeholders. Some of these values have to do with happiness, love, and other experiences. They are essentially by-products. Your festival is a setting that is an opportunity for creating these essential by-products. They can work or fail.

Business partners can be convinced of these values and of your setting for these values.

They can also be approached because your assets strengthen their goals. Here you have something that is not your main goal, nor an essential by-product, but a side effect of your festival, such as the concentration of people, the money they spent locally, the aura of artists, or the buzz created. All these can fit with the business goals of your business partner. As long as this festival-asset-linking-to-business-partners is in line with your values, it's ok.

I will always remember a speech by Jo Libeer, a Flemish businessman and a sponsor of the arts, in particular music. He said that so many artistic directors came to him and sold him the event and public relation opportunities of their music festivals and orchestras, with really nice receptions, with the best food in a unique setting. He said: "If I want to host a reception for 500 people with champagne and food in a nice setting, I do not need you, I can do that myself. But the encounter with the music, the inspiration it gives me to hear, see and maybe talk to the musicians, that is a thing I cannot organize. And if you ask me to help you making that possible, I will consider it profoundly".