

General Commentary

In response to 'Planning in the face of uncertainty' International Webinar and facilitation of break out session 2

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The breakout group began with each person (except the principal speakers from the opening session) offering some comment or response to the theme of the day, saying a little bit about how they had dealt with this in their work, what were their preoccupations, challenges, opportunities. This proved useful in setting the scene for those who did not know each other but also showed the variety of experiences and concerns. The dominance of artist-led events curators and artist-makers in the room inevitably steered conversations towards their concerns and it would be interesting to know to what extent their concerns are reflected in other breakout sessions.

There were useful insights as to how the functionality of festivals and festival-making had been interrupted, ranging from the obvious such as travel restrictions and public health limits on public gatherings to more conceptual. Examples included if you are an artist whose primary practice is festival commissions with international partners, how do you negotiate and pursue an artistic development when your co-creators might be experiencing different stages of the virus & different levels of lockdown? Another observation was concern that, while everyone was used to multi-tasking, there was an inevitable loss of specialist skills (doing everything yourself because of working in isolation). This raised concerns then, on whether artists and festivals can make the 'best version of themselves' when that best version relies on input from lots of other people. Similarly with new restrictions, was work they had produced prior to the pandemic still relevant and how would they fashion new languages and approaches.

Key points arising from the overall conversation were:

1. Uncertainty is not entirely negative

In response to the topic of the day, the group distinguished very clearly between artistic uncertainty and business uncertainty, different but connected things and driven by very different motivations. They described the inevitable 'heart in the mouth' of festivals. They ruminated on the fact that responding quickly to changing circumstances was in their DNA but that this uncertainty when the goalposts kept moving had been heartbreaking. In addition, there was palpable unspeakable loss of opportunity, energy, livelihood and capacity to plan, reflected upon by makers/producers and by those who saw themselves as principally 'organisers/curators'. The complexity of their planning and production processes were already difficult and they were facing ongoing delays and start-stop policy changes that made work of scale and full artistic realisation almost impossible.

This was not however, a wholly negative experience and some of the need to pivot as festivals meant they were perhaps less emotionally attached to their programme than other organisations or types of work (this is however, speculative). While many were facing quite challenging financial uncertainty, they also expressed it as presenting opportunities to take more risks, to experiment, to shift gear and question themselves.

'If I'm going to go down, I'm going to make art going down.'

Individuals, facing the loss of entire years and multiple years' worth of work and contracts were shifting their attention to delayed projects, thinking about not just survival but new, alternate ways to do, make and connect with communities. In some ways this offers breathing space to make contingency plans, diversify, step out of a cycle of 'doing' into something a more developmental. Examples included a barn conversion and a reversion to 'making work ourselves for ourselves', a re-localising as it were. It also highlighted moral ethical concerns (discussed below) and emphasised the increasing fluidity or absence of any definitive entity of what is a 'festival' or a 'festival organisation/producer'.

A knock on effect of this play with uncertainty was a change in how different participants described time. Temporality, the rupture a festival brings was also tempered by slowing down planning to give more time to thinking, learning to live with uncertainty and learning to act quickly. While we can understand temporality as intrinsic to festivals, covid19 would appear to be adjusting and splintering our understanding of this in to multiple points and forms.

2. Changing the contracts

Much like the fluidity of what is a festival and who makes it, participants spoke about needing to change the nature of agreements. Covid clauses, cancellation fees as costs, the difficulty of negotiating the regional and international variations in lockdown and liability all featured. Some talked about simplifying the contract, accepting that certain elements were beyond anyone's control so ideas of liability needed to change to being about 'let's not leave anyone stuck', the 'let's us both not be assholes' clause or, as one put it, 'ethical contracting'. No doubt this is informed by issues of scale – such morally driven contracts might be harder to enforce in larger more commercially driven enterprises (again speculative) and the nature of relationship between festival, artist and community dictates the level of commitment to honouring them. However, again this suggested that in the face of a global pandemic, the international and Irish festivals community are concerned with moral and ethical obligations to their peers (festivals, arts organisations and artists) and to their communities. It was understood that the risks (financial and other) were not shared equally either within the field/artforms or globally. It also suggests that the primary motivation for their work is not business or survival but delivery and sustainability in a more holistic and ecological sense.

3. Reinvention as resilience

The term 'resilience' came up a number of times but some were clear that to be 'artist-led' or to be a specialist artform festival was a very different kind of resilience to that described in policy or business, one which of its nature needed to be adaptive and in some cases 'nomadic'. The experience of the period to date had been varied – some had cancelled, some postponed, some reoriented their work, others were proceeding with some form of 'reinvention', rebirthing an almost entirely new festival, revisiting why and how they did what they did. This idea of a return to question their purpose, to let habits and practices go, came up frequently not as a panicked response but as a reasoned questioning and reflection.

There are negative aspects to this. The evident precarity of even highly successful festivals and individuals was destabilised and even with varied levels of state subsidy or Universal Basic Income schemes, many talked about finding 'solutions within poverty' rather than restoring incomes to pre-covid levels. The 'loss was untenable' and key moments, emergencies, opportunities, long-planned projects, loss of/to audiences, were mourned. Their temporality had rendered them beyond recovery. Again with a more global perspective in the room, the global experience was darker in non-western nations where no state support system existed. In these settings, the reality of 'starve or get covid' across all industries meant lockdown was impossible, a special case for art challenging yet necessary. This inspired provocation to be more fearless but also to protect one's artistic community, to change the festival to match the needs of its context – if they need a soup kitchen, let there be a soup kitchen.

The question of reinvention led to discussions of what is kept and what is left behind. Many referenced the intersectional inequalities of festivals (demographic, intercultural, global) and suggested that the 'code that was [being] reproduced is undone'. If and when 'the sector' comes back, it should come back to a 'future place'. The space left in cancellation and rethinking being prompted had led many to consider how they could conceive new more equitable, inclusive and environmental approaches: To gather for longer and with a different range of collaborators, to share experiences, to extend what festivals exist to do and how. Those from an outdoor arts community explored how their work was exterior to institutions and there was much discussion of breaking down or inverting walls of cultural monoliths both in terms of artistic and audience inclusivity. All of this suggested a dismantling of prior networks and operating business models but also creative rethinks on how what comes back is 'better'.

4. Digital as tool, decision or form

At the moment of discussion, many were beginning, or beginning to think about, emerging into physical face to face events planning. Lockdown and travel restrictions and the resulting shift to digital had pushed many festivals into online delivery. Some had already developed hybrid models in which they had continued some form of local engagement alongside digital (some as community activism, some renovating buildings for performance during lockdown, some working on socially distanced live projects). The consensus that some element of digital had liberated potential and increased accessibility and the consideration of predicted further outbreaks meant that most felt it would be a part of their future approach and programming. Many also talked about the formation of new communities of interest and the ability to engage in national debates despite their geographic location or other responsibilities. Some felt things like digital meetings had in many ways levelled a national playing field.

There were however, mixed views. Like those working in outdoor arts, those from digital arts backgrounds felt this shift was uninterrogated and failing to draw on the expertise of those whose principal work was in this field. Concerns came up about digital inequality as artists and smaller festivals struggled to work with limited means, technology, broadband, etc, reflected perhaps most starkly by international colleagues discussing much greater variance in digital access. Others questioned who digital online engagement was for and had rejected this as a route: why would we, what would we lose and who would be left behind? What are we doing when we 'engage' in the digital space? There were concerns about whether over-reliance would be of less value to communities whose mental health was affected by lockdown. Digital inequalities also came up as a concern about communities.

All were pretty clear that digital provision/consumption would not replace the desire and demand for physical in person experience. Participants described a sense of 'responsibility to our human nature'.

We are not screen beings.

This need for assembly was as much about the public/communities/audience having festivals as a 'disturbance in their every day' (again reflecting the temporality point above) as it was the festivals feeling the need for gathering as international assemblies, points of sharing, ideas forged in bars and cafes, backs of taxis and random meetings. For all that the digital capacity was an equalizer it did not replace the human exchange.

Digital then as the pandemic response evolves is not a generic or common 'solution' for either the function, engagement or creation of creative assemblies like festivals.

Digital is not just about broadcast.

Instead, festivals should be examining how it might be intrinsic to purpose, as a reasoned conscious action and not a substitute.

5. Radical locality

Participants frequently situated their festivals and practice in two contexts – their locality (city, nation, geography) and their artistic community – with feelings of moral obligation to both. They were however, resistant to a rhetoric of community or public service, the idea of 'the disturbance of the everyday' being a disruption rather than reinforcement of publicly provided activities. While there were clear identifications of local need and festivals adjusting to in some ways quite non-artistic engagements, these were radical, provocative evocations of locality and commonality in spite of rather than because of public funding or perceived public duty.

The emphasis on locality and community is interesting as pretty much everyone in the group described international festival practice. Lockdown appeared to have prompted a rethink of how artistic work moves around globally and the relationship of global creative discourses to local contexts. Many of the discussions around the 'future place' of festivals heavily emphasised environmentalism and equality. This included refashioning programmes so that artists stayed longer, collaborated with communities/artists. Also worth noting that the sense of fulfilling local community need and finding solutions that the local community were happy with also played a role (subsequently I was told the a festival in Borris in Ossory had consulted with the residents to establish whether the community felt it was safe to proceed with visiting artists/inviting outside guests). This suggests a really interesting dynamic between tourism/regeneration drivers of festivals and ownership of/duty to local audiences/communities is emerging.

Public policy and funding was discussed infrequently however, a key issue raised was in the desire to evolve their own responses to their locality, to be trusted to produce and represent a community and context. There were in some ways resistances to being annexed into mass campaigns, appeals or governmental programmes, seeking instead to find more

nuanced, organic and environmental ways to connect and engage. Agencies were seen as 'governing bodies of money distribution' who were NOT in communities.

Again with varying experiences of democracy, state supports and freedoms, there were also more strident responses to argue festivals' moral obligation to be politically resistant. Lockdown was not only artistically and financially but politically repressive and some cautioned that the convenience of holding a society at bay would leave freedom for exploitation, political corruption, implicit policies being enacted (e.g. indefinite venue closures) and the removal of freedoms. Again connected to the perceptions of risk and uncertainty, the need to act with stridency, to consider to whom a festival or artist is obligated and how this affects decisions was at the fore of this discussion.

Dr Ali FitzGibbon, July 2020