

Talking Festivals Curated Conversations, Session 2

Festivals and socially engaged arts

Friday 22nd May 2020

2-3.30pm

This session is for festivals that have a strong commitment to initiating and supporting durational socially engaged art projects with local communities that in many cases result in public facing outputs presented during the festival. The festival representatives will be invited to outline the challenges they are facing sustaining projects that were in train and share ideas they are working on to enable artists work in a community setting in the future. Does the flexibility of the festival model provide distinctive opportunities for socially engaged art practices in a world of restricted interaction?

In attendance

Organisation	Contributor	Arts Practice/Artform area
Cork Midsummer Festival	Kath Gorman	MDA
Cairde Arts Festival	Tara McGowan	MDA
Alternative Entertainments	Martin Moran	Arts participation
Tallaght Community Arts	Tony Fegan	Arts participation
Summer Sings	Eimear Hurley	YPCE
Alchemy	Eamon Sweeney	Arts Participation/Music
The Five Lamps Festival	Roisin Lonergan	MDA
Live Collision	Lynnette Moran	MDA/Theatre

Architecture on the Edge	Frank Monahan	Architecture
The Arts Council of Ireland	Dr David Teevan Karl Wallace Monica Corcoran Ann O'Connor	Moderator Head of Festivals Strategic Development Department Head of Arts Participation

Minutes

David Teevan introduced the session, reiterating that this meeting was intended for festivals that have a socially engaged art practice. He remarked that the day previously he attended a similar event organised by Theatre Forum which had over 270 attendees. This emphasised the lack of a resource organisation similar to Theatre Forum for festival makers and how a sense of solidarity and community may not be as easily available to this sector. David went on to say how the Change Makers Festivals' Conference aimed to combat this in addition to the current digital focus groups. He explained how this focus group in particular would have an operational similarity amongst all attendees. It was hoped that the session would bring to light some ideas that each attendee was coming up with in the face of the current COVID '19 crisis with a focus on social practice.

Karl Wallace built on this by emphasising how important these sessions were for the Arts Council to gather intelligence and also to identify how the Arts Council is best placed to support festivals. He also encouraged all attendees to get in contact with the Festivals team with any ideas or further comments they had after the session was over.

This was followed by introductions by each festival representative.

Festivals introductions:

Kath Gorman – Cork Midsummer Festival

Kath is the Head of Participation and Engagement with the Cork Midsummer Festival. She emphasised that the festival has gone through a number of decision-making phases over the last number of months. These decisions have mainly been concerned with postponements, reinventions and online delivery adaptations. The restrictions have provoked the festival to explore what is possible and feasible with regard to online delivery. Their current programme will be announced in two weeks' time with two participatory projects being delivered online. She said that, although she was grateful that these participatory events were still happening,

they bring with them their own challenges and take so much longer to create. Kath expressed that one of her main concerns was the long-term impacts of the restrictions, specifically in relation to the relationships they have created with the communities they work with. She expressed concern with how best to identify the needs of these communities and how best to work together. Kath also noted that longer term planning has had to be put on hold whilst the festival dealt with the immediate situation.

Tara McGowan – Cairde Arts Festival

Similarly to Cork Midsummer Festival, Tara stated that their decision-making has consisted of postponements, online initiatives and some projects continuing as planned for now. One of Tara's concerns was knowing the correct online platforms to use during the festival and how to make sure it is technically robust. She said that they plan to use Eventbrite for some of their events but expressed interest in what the other attendees were using. Tara also mentioned that all their events will be free to attend but donations will be accepted. Tara remarked that the festival has four ongoing projects which are all socially engaged which have all been kept going in one way or another, some have been easier to adapt and maintain than others. These projects include the Cairde Young Curators Programme, a residency with Junk Ensemble, and two projects with people living in direct provision in Sligo, one in collaboration with Brokentalkers, the other with Sorcha Fox. She also stated that the latter has been made possible in part through a reallocation of funds from Creative Sligo.

Martin Moran – Alternative Entertainments

Martin stated that he runs three separate festivals and is involved in a fourth. He explained how he has already cancelled one children's music festival that he runs as the festival is heavily connected with schools which are currently closed. The festival he was specifically interested in referencing during this session was Unwrapped, which takes place on the first Saturday in December. As there was a significant amount of time until it was due to take place, he felt there may not be need for a cancellation. He talked about how there were explorations taking place of how the festival could happen including online events as well as bringing performers to specific communities as opposed to asking audiences to come to attend events. Martin emphasised that he was exploring what possibilities were available with regard tech and software. He stated that they were working towards having some online events but were also planning some real life events.

Tony Fagan – Alternative Entertainments

Tony added to this by remarking that Unwrapped was a participatory festival as a whole which works with young emerging artists and also people from different socio-economic backgrounds as well as people with disabilities. Tony emphasised how their concerns were not predominantly financial ones but instead questions regarding what restrictions and compliance may exist come December-time. Tony also expressed concern with regard to how they may be able to work with the local authority. He also explained that online events may create barriers to engagement as some audiences may exist in digital poverty.

Eimear Hurley – Summer Sings

Eimear explained how this year's Summer Sings is running in an online capacity. This year's iteration of the festival, which takes place between the 13th and 17th of July, will ask participants to record themselves participating. These recordings will then be all edited together into a video. The recordings offer the opportunity for participants to represent themselves in a more individualistic way, which would not be an option normally. The video, they intend, will aim to replace the concert that they usually feature as part of their programme. For this year, registration will be open to households as opposed to individual children in order to encourage family participation. This brings with it certain challenges, specifically concerns with how to turn a home environment into a "transformative festival experience". However, it also offers to the opportunity to create new initiatives, make creative responses to the current restrictions and engage with more audiences, even global ones.

Eamonn Sweeney – Alchemy

Eamonn is involved in curating a festival in the Ashford area that focuses on music and poetry and engagement with the locality, with an emphasis on children's events. The festival was due to take place in May, but is now cancelled. He explained how the majority of performances have been cancelled and expressed his opinion that Zoom did not offer the same quality of experience that real-life happenings would especially with a primary school age group. As he works a lot with schools during this festival, Eamonn expressed how schools are currently stretched to the limit as it is and that anything that was not core and was not a timetabled event is going to be causing stress to fit it in. Another big part of the festival would be concerts in churches and, when the restrictions ease, this could be more significant for the festival as they could make full use of the space. Eamonn also expressed the need for some organisation to provide some protocols for such events and how to give parents confidence to bring their children to an event.

Roisin Lonergan – The Five Lamps Festival

Roisin explained that the Five Lamps Festival, which was due to take place at the end of March and beginning of April, is a geographical, area-based festival and now has been postponed to December. At the moment, they are currently producing some online events which start on Monday with online chats with festival artists who were due to perform/participate in the festival. This, Roisin feels, gives the festival the opportunity to see how well they can adapt to an online realm and if they can feature even more artists than originally planned? Roisin remarked that the reaction from artists has been polarising, with some eager to adapt their work to be engaged with online and some refusing to entirely. Roisin went on to build on what Tony expressed regarding audiences who live in digital poverty. She remarked that, whilst some audiences may not live in digital poverty, they may not have the knowledge or expertise to use their digital products in a way that is now necessary.

Lynnette Moran – Live Collision

Lynnette is the Founder of Live Collision, an annual arts festival focusing on live arts practice. The festival creates bilateral relationships with communities of interest and only features work that has never been shown in Ireland before. Lynette explained that they were four weeks away from the festival taking place and a week away from announcing their programme before lockdown was announced. Because this time frame was so short, the festival did not feel comfortable asking artists to reimagine their work. Instead they have been engaged with adjusting their programme, postponing events and creating a hybrid digital edition of the festival entitled Electric Dreams. This hybrid festival essentially acted as an announcement of the artists they planned to feature and encouraged interaction from audiences by following these artists on social media. Lynette remarked that the Live Collision festival always had an online/digital element, however she did agree with Roisin and Tony by saying that it was a myth that digital automatically meant democratic. Having said that, they have created various online initiatives that give artists that were intended to be featured the opportunity to meet each other. This, Lynette felt, acted as a method of support for these artists who are now lacking networking opportunities.

Frank Monahan – Architecture on the Edge

Frank emphasised that he intended to attend a future digital session and only was listening in to this edition. Before leaving, he did just want to make some responses. Architecture on the Edge is very much a place-based festival where attendees go into private dwellings, which would be impossible to do at this stage. As a result the festival were also exploring online events as well as possibly creating public installations that limited audiences could experience. He remarked that the festival is due to take place in the autumn and, by that time, he felt that audiences would be exhausted with online events and instead would be eager to engage with something in real life. He was interested in Lynnette's remarks about bringing artists into the conversation and asking

them to respond to the world we are living in now. He concluded that key concerns at this time are maintaining a presence, creating a festival atmosphere and allowing the joy of festivals to still exist.

FM left the meeting

Discussion

David Teevan began the discussion by building on Franks remarks regarding the importance of maintaining the joys of a festival. This theme arose from last week's session and is something that David struggles with himself. David went back to Tony's comments regarding travelling festivals that would bring the art to specific communities and asked him to elaborate more on this. Tony felt that in a crisis, for the arts have to go forward they have to go back, but back with much more knowledge. He felt confident that the Unwrapped Festival can utilise digital platforms to do some of the festival processes with audiences partly because they've a core audience that have grown up with the festival and have the knowledge and experience to engage with it in such a way. In addition, he felt it was very possible to bring a travelling element to specific communities whilst adhering to risk assessments and COVID compliance in order for audiences to experience a 'live moment'. However, Tony emphasised that, in order to achieve this travelling project, support from local authorities and the guards would be necessary in order to achieve this. Martin built on this by remarking that there would be a lot of potential in Frank's comments regarding the creation of installations and meeting points within the public domain. However, he expressed concerns with the difficulties of policing these points properly.

At this point, KW mentioned that the Guidelines for Reopening Arts Centres had been published by Theatre Forum. KW also asked the group how festivals manage the balance between normal health and safety protocols without being overly sensitive to the point where they fear operating at all... Is it helpful to have festival protocols in place and what should it cover? Arising from a conversation KW had with Tara McGowan, he also asked the group did any intend to change their policies with these issues in mind. Monica Corcoran built on this by referencing participatory work online and engaging children or vulnerable adults. Monica asked the group if they had encountered any particular challenges in this area.

Tony Fagan responded to this by stating that the Unwrapped Festival is currently working with initiatives which engage vulnerable adults and people with disabilities. Because of this they are using private online workshops and processes when dealing with these audiences. In addition, parental permissions are still sought with regard to photo and video usage of children. Tony remarked that staying in discreet and private groups and networks allow the festival to operate

and connect with these audiences whilst creating a level of trust between festival and audience member. However, this is not yet part of their policy. Tony remarked that an advisory group with expertise in this area would be welcomed. Lynette responded to this by expressing a need for guidance or policy development to be worked on from the participatory arts sector.

This was followed up by discussing the temporal nature of festivals and their flexibility. David Teevan stated that their flexibility may allow them to provide solutions to arts engagement that venues may not be able to provide. As such the festivals sector needs to be recognised and heard. Tony Fagan built on this by comparing festivals to the “big beasts” of venues and arts centres. He felt that festivals may be overlooked, but emphasised that removing festivals or allowing them to disappear may have considerable knock on effects on other areas of the arts sector including venues. Kath Gorman also emphasised the importance of reminding the public that festivals operate throughout the year at a local level and are not just in operation during the dates of the festival.

Roisin Lonergan mentioned that Crinnui na nOg will likely offer some policies in place for the safety of children and vulnerable adults. Tara McGowan responded to this by saying that Youth Theatre Ireland and continuously updating their policies in this regards. Lynette Moran remarked that the EFA (European Festivals Association), though not specific to Ireland, provided support and guidance for her during this time. This led to a discussion regarding the need for resource organisations to provide guidance to festivals with regard to their policies. Tara expressed that she would welcome the creation of a festival resource organisation by reiterating the value of the Change Makers Festivals’ Conference. She questioned whether creating such an organisation was even possible in light of the community. David Teevan responded to this by agreed that the diversity of the community brought with it challenges with regard to the creation of a resource organisation.

Conclusion

Both Karl Wallace and David Teevan concluded the session by thanking all attendees for their participation, reiterating the importance and encouraging conversations and discourse between festivals and reminding each participant about the larger digital discussions taking place in June.

End.

