

Talking Festivals Curated Conversations, Session 3

The public realm

Friday 29th May 2020

2-3.30pm

One of the distinguishing aspects of festivals is the opportunity they provide to the arts community to bring the arts out of the confines of dedicated art spaces into the public realm. This session will focus on festivals that have demonstrated creative ingenuity in their use of public spaces. Attendees will be invited to talk about their organisational response to the presentation of arts in public spaces following the public health measures such as social distancing and limited numbers for outdoor gatherings.

In attendance

| Organisation | Contributor | Arts Practice/Artform area |
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| Spraoui | TV Honan and Miriam Dunne | Circus Street Arts & Spectacle |
| National Circus Festival | Con Horgan and Maire Dineen | Circus Street Arts & Spectacle |
| Puca Festival | Niamh Lunny | MDA |
| Carlow Arts Festival | Jo Mangan | MDA |
| Waterford Walls | Edel Tobin | MDA/Visual Arts |
| Ballydehob Jazz Festival | Joseph O'Leary | MDA/Music |
| Architecture at the Edge | Frank Monahan | Architecture |
| The Arts Council of Ireland | Dr David Teevan Karl Wallace | Festivals Advisor Head of Festivals |

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| | Davide Terlingo Fionnuala Sweeney | Head of Circus, Street Arts & Spectacle. Head of Film & Architecture |
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Minutes

David Teevan (DT) welcomed all participants to the third digital discussion for festivals. He emphasised the importance of these sessions by referencing similar events for the dance and arts centres communities which have more opportunities for meeting and discussion, opportunities which are lacking for the festivals sector. DT remarked that each festival represented in this session had a strong connection to the public realm. He also reminded participants of the larger discussions that will be informed by these smaller meetings which will be happening at the end of June. Karl Wallace (KW) echoed the remarks and welcomed all participants to the meeting. He hoped that this session would allow a space for discussion on limitations, opportunities and innovations each participant was experiencing.

Introductions

Edel Tobin - Waterford Walls Festival

Edel remarked that although the Waterford Walls Street Arts Festival has cut all hubs of gathering spaces and eliminated any artists coming together, the current restrictions regarding social distancing best lends itself to what they do as a festival. The festival will run from mid-July to the end of August with artists painting every five days. ET remarked that the local authority, HSE and local enterprise office have been very supportive and informative during this time. She also stated that they also plan to include some online activities as part of the festival.

Conor Horgan (CH) & Maire Dineen (MD) - National Circus Festival

The National Circus Festival generally takes place in the second week of November each year. Conor expressed that they had time on their side in terms of their planning. The festival consists of mainly indoor events but also includes outdoor. They try to find different spaces to use each year but CH remarked that circus is very demanding in terms of space and not that adaptable. At the moment they are remaining positive and open with regard to how to make the festival happen.

MD built on this by saying that they are working closely with Brian Carr, the COVID Officer nominated by Tralee Chamber. MD also stated that the festival is waiting for the social

distancing restrictions to be lowered from 2m to 1m which will make things easier for them. They are highly dependent on government guidelines and are watching other countries in terms of their progression. She also stated that although they are currently focusing on outdoor planning, some of their areas of concern were insurance and facilities on site: how many toilets needed, etc. They are also in talks with Siamsa Tire regarding collaborations.

Miriam Dunne - Waterford Spraoi

Waterford Spraoi was due to take place on the August bank holiday weekend, but this is now cancelled. Miriam remarked that street arts is impossible in this current situation and, along with the festival, their parade is also cancelled. Having said this, they are currently planning an event which they hope will take place in early September. Miriam remarked that Waterford City Council have taken out a licence for outdoor events until Christmas this year, meaning that the festival does not need to which is one less thing to be concerned with. She also expressed exhaustion with online events and hoped that they wouldn't need to take their programme online.

Niamh Lunny (NL) - Curated Place (Puca Festival)

Niamh is a Creative Producer who works for Curated Place, an arts-led production agency. One of the agency's projects is the Puca Festival which takes place at Halloween over three different towns in Ireland; Athboy, Trim and Drogheda. Last year was the first iteration of this festival. At the moment, they are currently scenario planning for this festival and are waiting to see what the government guidelines will be in October. NL remarked that, similarly to Miriam, she is also exhausted with online events and is concerned with how to properly connect audiences to art and how to establish trust in audiences that they will be kept safe. NL also stated that another of her concerns was a free culture which is arising from the COVID crisis as so much art is now available online for free. DT responded that some festivals and institutions are pushing back against the free culture and are now charging audiences for online arts engagement for example the Galway Film Fleadh.

Jo Mangan (JM) - Carlow Arts Festival

Jo runs the Carlow Arts festival which would have been launched on Wednesday 28th of May. She expressed that she had to decide very quickly what the festival was going to do for 2020. A programme of events has been created that does include online events; however these online elements will be short and will not require a long attention span. One of the online events will be an hour of nine different performances from Argentina to Austria but mainly focused on Carlow-based and national artists. The festival started a virtual reality cinema last year which

they are exploring further. They are also commissioning some digital specific work which has been co-commissioned with Cork Midsummer Festival. This will capture slices of people's lockdown rooms and interior lives which will be experienced in an online platform. She remarked that they are no longer bound by time so they will be producing large scale and socially distant work later in the year.

JM remarked that this period could be used to deepen a connection with artists. This she felt, could counteract recent trends with regard to the pressure to showcase more large-scale, palatable productions that would attract large audiences and instead could shift focus to niche projects that centre on creating more meaningful and deeper engagement with audiences.

Joe O'Leary (JOL) - Ballydehob Jazz Festival

Ballydehob in Co Cork has a population of 267 people. The Ballydehob Jazz Festival attracted between 6,500 and 7,500 visitors last year and contributes to 10-15% percent of local businesses annual turnover. It was originally styled on a New Orleans Jazz Festival but in recent years had included more MDA programming including collaborations with a new local puppet company. It was due to take place on the May bank holiday weekend but was cancelled along with their Jazz Funeral parade. Using Stage 10 broadcasting software, the festival put together an online programme to a very positive response although they did experience some technical difficulties. They have postponed their live programme until October but envisage that it will be a much smaller programme than usual due not only to the health restrictions but also financial ones. This new programme will take place in the local community hall as opposed to the smaller venues that they usually work with.

Frank Monahan (FM) - Architecture at the Edge

Architecture on the Edge takes place in Galway City but extends to Co. Mayo. It is based on an open house model and is a celebration of the architecture in place. The festival usually takes place in October with FM stating that it will go ahead at that time in some capacity. FM expressed interest in exploring ideas around public installations, 'parklets' and how we can use the streets. In response to JM, Frank also stated that this period could be used as an opportunity for reflection for festivals as to how best to connect with audiences and also to identify what the purpose of festivals were. Were they just to generate profits for local businesses or were they about connecting people to the arts? DT commented on this by saying that this extraordinary period of reflection would not have happened during a normal year.

NL added that these ideas may help her move forward with this year's iteration of Puca. She also followed up with a previous comment by saying that although she was tired with online events; they do offer opportunities to connect with worldwide audiences. However, this does not offer a solution to the more immediate problems. DT responded to this by saying that rural audiences often feel disconnected from arts and culture; however this is not the case anymore.

TV Honan (TH) - Waterford Spraoi

Following up from Miriam's introduction, TV stated that Waterford Spraoi had the advantage of being both building based and a production company. He remarked that instead of a parade, there were opportunities to have something happen in their buildings. Audiences would then pass the production as opposed to vice versa. He also stated that time-line distancing as well as frequency may be an option for festivals which would allow staggered engagement with audiences. He expressed concern with festivals losing their ambitions to engage with audiences and had no ideological hang ups about generating profits for local businesses. He remarked that the south east of Ireland had higher unemployment and lower incomes and remarked that Waterford Spraoi played an important role with regard to combating this. He also remarked that Failte Ireland should now be supporting arts festivals more than they previously have.

JM added that, although she was interested in deepening connection with audiences, she had no ideological issue with profit making for local businesses. She also remarked that not every county council is supporting festivals and that the arts are at the bottom of their list of concerns. DT pointed out that there seemed to be unevenness amongst the participants with regard to support from local authorities.

Discussion

Con Horgan stated that it is important to look to other countries with regard to how we can approach festival making moving forward. He remarked that his connections in South Korea and Taiwan have offered guidance on how to deal with everything. In these countries, theatres are opening again and outdoor performances that are socially distant are taking place. He remarked that if these outdoor performances are stewarded properly, this will create a sense of trust with audience members. Miriam built on this by saying that it was important to still think big. She remarked that there have been huge strides taken in the arts sector in recent years and this should not be lost.

Karl Wallace then asked if the group could discuss more what current solutions can be put into place. He asked Jo to speak more on the digital arts pieces that were being commissioned by Carlow Arts Festival and how these pieces can be best brought into the public realm. Jo remarked that the digital arts are not well represented in festivals at all. She remarked that she sees a distinction amongst online connect at the minute with a lot of work being re-appropriated to fit into an online realm, however the digital arts is specifically designed to be interacted with online/digitally. She remarked that the conversations that she is having with artists regarding this is very positive and exciting, conversations which have not happened before.

DT asked the group to comment on where they are at in terms of insurance. TVH responded to this by saying that Waterford Spraoi are good to go in that respect. Miriam added to this by saying that some street theatre performance companies have negotiated extensions on their insurance plans. Miriam also remarked that although she was previously negative about online initiatives she agreed with Jo and Niamh that it can allow engagement for much larger audiences. Jo responded to this by saying that prior to the health crisis “the man with the van” was the only one who was getting paid properly and now this may be shifted to “the man with a camera”. FM responded to this by emphasising again that audiences need excitement and connection and digital work is no substitute for a live and interactive experience. He also remarked that local authorities need to be more supportive in the face of this crisis as there is a likelihood that we will be facing 10 years of a recession.

The National Campaign for the Arts has launched a 13-point plan to secure the survival of the arts and culture sector in the face of the pandemic and DT outlined that individual artforms were better represented in this plan than festivals. This was followed by further discussion regarding the lack of government support for arts festivals. JL expressed concern with the need of a possible representative organisation. JM responded to this by expressing that the sector does not discuss their needs enough and emphasised the need for all festival makers to individually talk to their representatives.

KW brought the conversation back to issues regarding the public realm and questioned if there was a need for specific guidance on holding outdoor events for the sector. He asked participants for suggestions on how best to support the sector with this in mind and emphasised that no dedicated arts festival resource organisation is available to the sector to provide this. TVH proposed that festivals could act as an applied research project which could be compiled together to create some sort of guidance document. However, he stressed that the results and guidance from each festival might be out of date and irrelevant by the time it is printed. JM added to this by adding that the Production Manager with the Carlow Arts Festival along with other production managers were working on a best practice guidelines document. She also remarked that she did not see Theatre Forum as an organisation that represented festivals or production companies, but the festivals sector may need a similar organisation or model to create guidelines for outdoor events. She asked if the Arts Council can similarly resource an individual to compile all the information and examples. DT added to this by saying that such a

document would be helpful for festivals when dealing with local authorities and remarked that, if drafted correctly, the information would not go out of date quickly.

TVH and MD responded to this by saying that there were similarities between experiencing work in the public realm and the online realm in that productions need to be specifically designed to suit each environment. MD remarked that one of the city streets in Waterford is possibly going to be turned into an outdoor cafe which has been asked for years. JM remarked that festival makers need to be part of the decision-making with local authorities with regard to re-appropriating public spaces. FM seconded this concern and expressed that there should be dedicated public spaces for outdoor performances.

CH asked the group what their concerns were for 2021. Miriam responded to this saying that they were optimistic but have contingency plans in place. However, she did express some pressure as the next application for SF deadlines is fast approaching. KW responded outlined that for SF applicants the plan was to have a lighter touch application but was waiting for confirmation. He confirmed that the FIS application will ask festivals for details on contingency plans for 2021.

Conclusion

DT concluded the session by thanking everyone for coming and reminded each participant on the larger digital discussions taking place at the end of June.

END.

The public Zoom chat function was not used in this session