



SALZBURG  
GLOBAL  
SEMINAR

**CULTURE, ARTS AND SOCIETY**

**WHAT FUTURE  
FOR FESTIVALS?**

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# SALZBURG GLOBAL SEMINAR

CULTURE, ARTS  
AND SOCIETY

## WHAT FUTURE FOR FESTIVALS?



**OCTOBER 24 TO NOVEMBER 19, 2020**

Session 646

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## PREFACE

# WE NEED FESTIVALS – NOW MORE THAN EVER!

**Susanna Seidl-Fox**

*Program Director – Culture and the Arts*

One hundred years ago at Schloss Leopoldskron, Max Reinhardt, Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal founded the world-renowned Salzburg Festival as a “Festival of Peace” to transform “the whole town into one stage.” To celebrate this centenary so inextricably linked with our home – Schloss Leopoldskron – Salzburg Global Seminar originally scheduled the program *What Future for Festivals?* for March 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program was postponed to October and subsequently moved online due to continuing travel restrictions and health regulations.

Little did we know while developing the session in 2019, just how compelling and urgent the question at the center of our program – what future for festivals? – would be. Few sectors have been hit as hard by the pandemic as the cultural sector, with festivals being particularly vulnerable to the fallout from the compounded global crises – not just COVID-19, but also the climate crisis, and worldwide social and economic upheaval.

We know that festivals of all types and sizes have energized communities since time immemorial. Rooted in rituals, stories and faiths, they have embodied local and indigenous cultures and celebrated deep bonds to nature, land and the seasons. Modern festivals range from intimate experiments to gigantic mega-events, showcasing ever more diverse creative practices, from the performing, visual, and traditional arts to photography, film, literature, street arts, food, light, design and ideas-based, future-focused, eco-inspired events. Whatever their intended focus – creative innovation, activism, city branding, wellbeing, community building, pure entertainment – festivals have always spoken to fundamental human needs. They have allowed us to share in a density and intensity experience, revel in specialness beyond day-to-day routines, and join – as the German word “Festspiele” infers – in “celebration and play.”

But what is the future of festivals as we look ahead to continuing travel constraints, unpredictable limitations on public events, and looming economic crises? And, even with COVID-19 vaccines now forthcoming in some parts of the world, how will both the festival landscape and festival goers themselves have changed in the interim? How will festivals adapt and cope with these altered circumstances? These and many other questions were at the center of our online discussions in October and November 2020.

This report and the accompanying thought-pieces authored by several program participants share reflections on the past year and insights on the challenging path ahead for festivals. While we identified even more questions than answers during our conversations, one thing is certain: we need festivals now more than ever. The coronavirus pandemic has brought into sharp relief that festivals are not just “nice to have” – we must have them to thrive and not just survive.

Human beings need to gather, to celebrate, they need their spirits to soar, to witness artistic genius, to feel chills and goosebumps run down their spines, to revel in the thrill of live performance and shared experience, to clap and be applauded, to amaze and be amazed, to laugh, shout, and be joyful together.

Without such experiences we may function, but we will not be truly alive.



#### LEFT TO RIGHT

Program Curators, Ping-Ann Addo and Beatriz García and Program Director, Susanna Seidl-Fox

#### BELOW

Participants from around the world gathered on Zoom rather than Schloss Leopoldskron as originally planned, pre-pandemic



## WHAT FUTURE FOR FESTIVALS?

Festivals are celebratory gatherings, offering space for exploration, debate and joy. They provide artists a chance to experiment, audiences a space to come together and everyone the opportunity to experience a moment distinct from everyday life.

The *What Future For Festivals?* program was part of Salzburg Global Seminar's long-running Culture, Arts and Society series. In an online program convened by the program's co-moderators Ping-Ann Addo and Beatriz Garcia, emerging and established festival makers, academics and culture bearers from diverse geographic and social backgrounds considered how the pandemic has both connected festival makers in a unified struggle and underlined the disparity among festivals operating in different contexts.

This report outlines the key findings from the program's plenary sessions and focus groups, highlighting the need for trust and solidarity across the festival sector as well as a radical reimagining of stakeholder engagement, resource management and internationalism.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE PROGRAM

- Festivals initially responded to the COVID-19 crisis by prioritizing the well-being of their immediate community—their artists, staff and audiences.
- Better-resourced festivals advocated for the arts. Less-resourced festivals struggled to survive. Resources were not sufficiently shared.
- Medium- and longer-term responses to the COVID-19 pandemic should focus on creating a more equal festival sector and a greener, more socially just world.
- In planning for the future, festivals should consider their history and relationship to the land, question the narratives of their program, cultivate empathy and trust and stand in solidarity with other festivals around the world.

More information about the all participations of the *What Future for Festivals?* program is available **ONLINE [GO TO >>]**

## INTRODUCTION

Salzburg Global Seminar posed the question “what future for festivals?” six months before the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020. The spread of the novel coronavirus and catastrophic health and economic consequences undoubtedly changed the conversation around the future of festivals. However, while short-term survival strategies and emergency responses received necessary attention, the impact of the pandemic also brought into focus the on-going challenges facing festival makers today.

While it is dangerous to romanticize a crisis, a disruption of this caliber can change how festivals work, perhaps for the better. Collective chaos can have positive effects. Festivals are hubs of creativity; experimental zones with the ability to reflect and reshape social discourse and public needs. This crisis has forced festivals to re-examine their mission and their value, rework their systems of operation and think outside the box.

Festivals are powerful tools for building social cohesion, advancing international relations, celebrating heritage, fostering community well-being and providing safe zones for artists to innovate. How festivals are programmed, managed and curated affects who can access art, community and ideas. As festivals reimagine their future in a post-pandemic landscape – one that will be defined by economic constraints, the continuing climate crisis, and structural injustice – questions of equity, inclusion, responsibility and empathy must be at the forefront of the conversation.

Festivals need to return to their essence, offering people a chance to come together, to escape the oppressions of everyday life, to rethink collaboration, community and culture. There is value in sharing experiences that cannot be calculated through ticket sales and audience numbers. However, reimagining a future for festivals must also involve reimagining business models, stakeholder partnerships and community needs. A path forward needs to be practical, healing, characterized by solidarity, and open to all.

As participants engaged with the catalytic conversations and focus groups, key questions emerged. These questions often guided the discussions and offered a framework for reimagining the future of festivals.

- What is the value of festivals? To artists, audiences, governments and citizens?
- What are the needs of a festival's stakeholders? How, if at all, do these needs change over time?
- What are our priorities for the future? How can festivals transform their practice and maintain community trust? Who is being left behind?
- How can festivals best advocate for the arts and who are their partners in this mission?
- How can festivals work laterally across different sectors and with diverse communities?
- Can audience design be treated as a creative or dramaturgical challenge as well as a marketing strategy?
- For whom are festivals designed? What are the barriers to participation, belonging and ownership?
- What responsibility do festivals have to each other? What does it mean to stand in solidarity?
- What responsibility do festivals have to the earth? What commitments should we make to decarbonize our practice?
- What is the essence of a festival?

**WHAT WORD BEST DESCRIBES THE STATE OF THE FESTIVAL SECTOR DURING THE PAST SIX MONTHS?**

### PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO AN ONLINE SURVEY CONDUCTED MID-PROGRAM



# CATALYTIC CONVERSATIONS

The plenary sessions were structured around three **catalytic conversations** investigating the short-, medium- and longer-term future(s) for festivals. Each conversation began with an interactive group survey followed by a panel discussion offering thoughtful provocations on the significant issues facing festival makers. Participants then split into breakout rooms for small group discussions, with key points reported back to the main group at the end of the session.

## I: TAKING STOCK OF OUR PRESENT SITUATION

### SPEAKERS



**Lukas Crepaz**



**Sarah Hopwood**



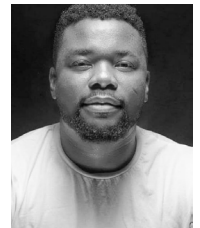
**Sabrina Lynn Motley**



**Ong Keng Sen**



**Smriti Rajgarhia**



**Kenneth Uphopho**

*Executive Director, Salzburg Festival, Austria*

*Managing Director, Glyndebourne Festival, UK*

*Director, Smithsonian Folklife Festival, United States*

*Artistic Director, TheatreWorks; Founder, International Curators Academy, Singapore*

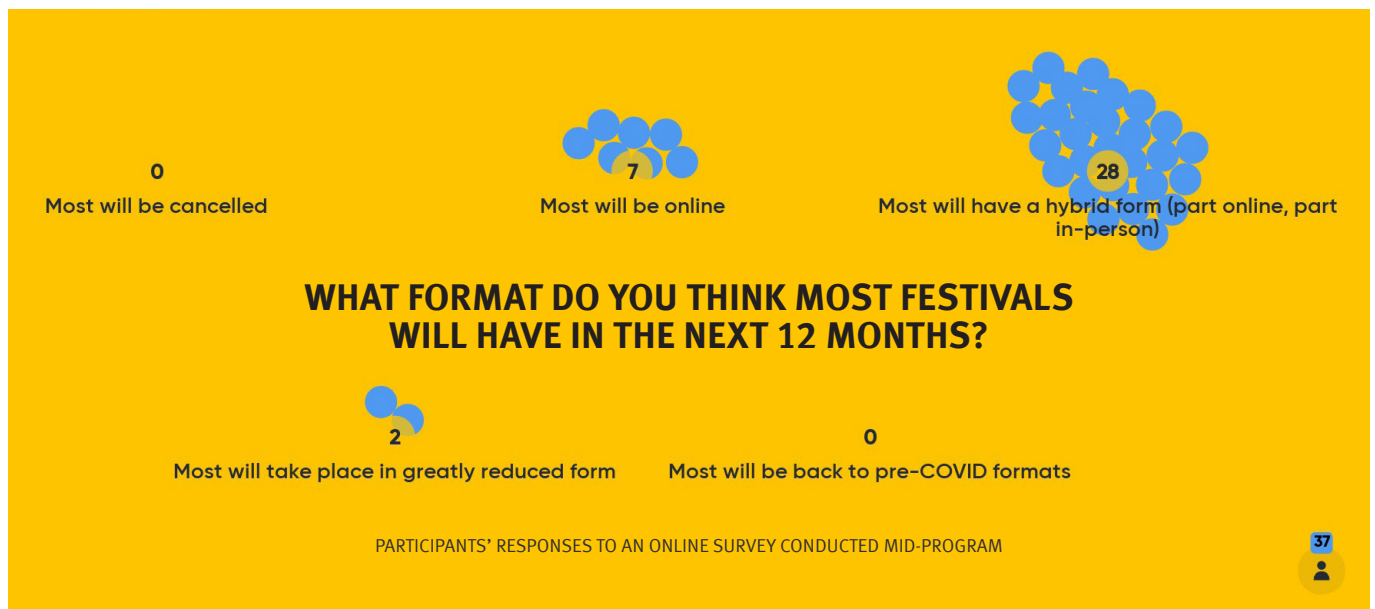
*Director, Serendipity Festival, India*

*Artistic Director, Lagos Fringe Festival, Nigeria*

**“We may be in the same storm, but we’re in different boats, with different capacities and resources.”**

Initially, this first catalytic conversation took stock of the immediate and devastating impacts of COVID-19 on festivals, looking at who had survived and how.

In the short-term, the ability to make decisions in a constantly changing landscape (acknowledging that those decisions may need remaking) and the ability to creatively adapt or pivot in response to unprecedented logistical obstacles proved essential. In other words, the leadership and drive to make things happen coupled with the resources to tackle unforeseen complications, allowed some festivals to successfully produce events both in-person and online during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Although ephemeral by nature, festivals can be incredibly resilient institutions. Festivals are surviving the COVID-19 crisis in part through their ability to adapt to challenging circumstances, but also as a result of pre-existing structures. Some festivals had emergency systems or budgets in place as a result of experiencing previous crises. Festivals with close relationships to their stakeholders, governments or local authorities were able to lobby for economic support and advocate for artists. Festivals with technical capabilities and digitally connected audiences were able to move online. In many ways, the tools already at a festival's disposal determined a festival's ability to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

As is often the case with crises, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected marginalized groups and underserved communities across the global. This same trend can be seen in the festival world. Regardless of their agility or leadership, festivals in regions or countries with fewer resources due to the lasting effects of colonization, war, authoritarian regimes or climate change are at a disadvantage on the global stage. Similarly, smaller, less well-established or more experimental festivals might struggle even in globally affluent nations. COVID-19 has impacted everyone, but it has not impacted everyone equally.

If the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic result in only the best-resourced festivals surviving or thriving, this would have a devastating effect on the arts sector and global inequality more broadly. Does the short-, medium- or long-term recovery from COVID-19 need to address this inequality and what responsibility do festivals have to each other?

***“How can diversity and equity be promoted and supported more strongly through festivals of the future?”***

## LESSONS FROM A YEAR IN “PANDEMIA”

**By: Enrique Avogadro**

### MINISTER OF CULTURE OF THE CITY OF BUENOS AIRES REFLECTS ON 2020 AND THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS AND WHERE THE ARGENTINE CAPITAL'S CULTURE SCENE GOES FROM HERE

2020 is definitely a year that we will have to work hard to forget. Arts and culture were particularly hard hit by the pandemic. Without open cultural venues and events, artists were left without performing or teaching opportunities and, in most of the world, with no safety net on which to rely during these hard times. Cultural festivals – primary targets in a social-distancing environment – had to be cancelled or postponed indefinitely.

Cultural areas in countries and cities around the world struggled to provide some help. The Buenos Aires arts and culture ecosystem usually never sleeps. We run around 10 international festivals, including FIBA (theatre), BAFICI (film) and Tango. We are in charge of Teatro Colón, as well as a very strong network of public libraries, public theaters, museums, art schools and a wide array of programs. We have more than 500 independent cultural venues. It has been a rough and busy year: we provided economic support, we launched a new streaming cultural service, and we drafted protocols in order to get each arts and cultural venue safely back on track. With our great summer season about to begin as I write, while we are still in the midst of the pandemic, we have been trying to understand what will be expected from cultural public policies in the years to come and how we can rethink our tools to have a greater impact.

Festivals play an especially important role in bringing us together to celebrate our diversity. In this respect, they help us fulfill communal purposes that will be more important than ever in the post-pandemic era. The future of festivals is also the future of arts and culture. Some lessons can already be extracted from this long and hard COVID-19 road that we are still walking that might be useful to help us foresee the challenges and opportunities that still await us.

### RECLAIM THE CITY

This year we had to completely rethink our relationship with the public realm. Suddenly, parks and other open-air venues became spaces for birthdays, weddings and other celebrations. Art professors, guitar teachers and yoga instructors took their classes outside, while cultural venues spread themselves out onto the sidewalks and streets. New local alliances and networks emerged as a way to weather the economic storm, bringing together independent bookstores, art galleries and restaurants.

Festivals will have the chance to foster this new vision as well, empowering people to reclaim their city for arts and culture and, in this way, to build a stronger sense of citizenship. Festivals can also become platforms to showcase hyperlocal cultural activities.

## TECHNOLOGY THAT BRINGS US TOGETHER

In 2020 we dealt with social distancing by using technology. Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp and other platforms helped us to stay in touch, to learn, to create and to come together. In Buenos Aires, we had record audiences for online performances offered by our theatres, museums, music venues and opera houses. The challenge ahead is how to continue to use these newly discovered tools to stay in touch, to find new ways to create, to build meaning into arts and culture projects. Participation and commitment can be enhanced through these new media in the future.

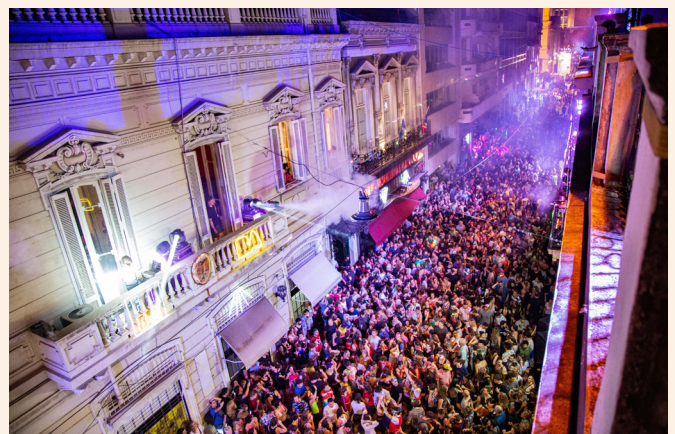
With hybrid programs in place, festivals can also be portals to other cities' cultural ecosystems, sharing contents and experiences digitally, and even co-producing projects at a distance.

## BUILDING BACK BETTER

Our main challenge is to learn from this annus horribilis in order to be better prepared to weather future disasters. The health of the cultural sector came into question because of this pandemic. Could it be possible to provide safety nets to artists and venues to help them better withstand future crises and to innovate their management practices in order to become more resilient? What role can festivals play in this so badly needed revolution in the cultural world?

The world will be different after COVID-19, and not necessarily for the better. Social inequality will be probably worse after all these harsh months of lockdowns and isolation. Arts and culture will be more important than ever in this new scenario, bringing people together, lifting spirits and providing hope. Festivals should play a key role in helping us overcome the challenges that await us.

Enrique Avogadro was appointed minister of culture of Buenos Aires in December 2017. He is the former deputy minister of culture of Argentina and, was previously undersecretary of creative economy at the City of Buenos Aires.



## **BREATHING IN THE NETWORK: NEW FORMS OF CULTURAL SOLIDARITY THROUGH ONLINE FESTIVAL ENGAGEMENTS**

**By: Ricardo Peach**

### **DIRECTOR OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN FESTIVAL VRYSTAAT KUNSTEFEEES ON HOW BUILDING CONNECTIONS WILL STRENGTHEN THE SECTOR POST-COVID-19**

COVID-19 has been a challenge to the arts and the well-being of artists like no other event I have experienced in my lifetime. In a society such as South Africa, where there is very little government support or capacity to meaningfully buffer the loss of income to artists, and little to no social security, the pandemic caused – and continues to cause – an astronomical loss to both the financial and mental health of our industry.

When the government mandated one of the strictest lockdowns in the world on March 27, 2020, our festival – Vrystaat Kunstefees (Vrystaat Art Festival) – faced imminent extinction. We had very little time to reflect, recover or reconsider our options, moreover, as we quickly had to figure out how to survive – financially and creatively.

Within a week of lockdown we convened our first online industry discussion with local artists to see what ideas we had for each other to continue creative work. We had an overwhelming response to this online gathering, if only in that it created a sense of community and solidarity in a time of disconnect. As a result, we developed monthly online discussions with and for our networks.

In hindsight, these industry discussions were our healing, reflection and recovery tools; we learned skills to iteratively develop new online strategies for 2020 and shift our business model completely into a digital space. In these discussions, notions of empathy, patience and having to think as “beyonders” (people who see beyond their own needs into those of others), spurred us on to think about how we could shift the festival’s focus to not only help us function, but also assist artists and those in the arts ecology to survive creatively.

As many of the Vrystaat Arts Festival’s programs for a physical event were already in place, we moved most of them online, including the Vryspraak-Digitaal program, the online Pan-African Creative Exchange (PACE), Vrystaat Klank & Klassiek, Snelstroom with more than 200 events, the Crossings online dance laboratory, and our first online arts market shared economy project – the Wolkewinkel.

Fortunately, our founding sponsor Media24 was willing to provide some operational funding. Their belief in us allowed others to come on-board with additional project funding. Many of these digital

initiatives will be continued and built into future hybrid iterations of the physical festival, once mass gatherings are again allowed.

Through Salzburg Global's online program *What Future for Festivals?* I was, for the first time since the pandemic started, able to reflect candidly with a wonderful group of festival peers on what was happening to us all in this period of radical uncertainty, and where we thought we were heading. It was a brilliant opportunity to take a moment to “breathe in the network”, convene in solidarity and share the anxieties, panics, traumas, losses, successes, hopes and continued determination we had in this period as leaders in the festival circuit. In the end, I realized that we are all fragile and vulnerable, but also extremely resilient human beings in this game.

What became immediately obvious were the extremely varied capacities, experiences and responses that festivals had in this time. Some festivals, particularly those located in countries where social and financial support was more forthcoming, had a unique opportunity to reflect more significantly on how they would pursue the conditions ahead. What also became clear was that smaller festivals and those in the global South in particular had already been deploying these strategies before COVID-19 hit, as they have always had to be particularly adaptable to a range of social, economic and political shocks and stressors.

Discussions on issues of diversity in the “new local” for festivals as a result of COVID-19 restrictions also opened up as one of the key outcomes for 2021 and beyond. The “new local” focusses on local artistic work recognizing that there are often already “international”, culturally diverse artists and audiences present in our regions.

Smaller groups of international, “embedded creatives” traveling to different places in the world to work for longer periods with local arts communities to create fresh, “new local” international work would also most likely be a feature of many future festivals. Networks between festivals to facilitate such exchanges would be invaluable.

A festival buddy system between smaller and more established festivals, where festivals are paired-up or matched in small groups to share knowledge, get feedback on your own festival and/or help develop initiatives for other people's festivals would be a wonderful extension of the *What Future for Festivals?* program going forward. New forms of cultural solidarity are indeed possible through online festival engagements and will help us expand our possibilities to collaborate in new ways in the future.

Ricardo Peach is the director of the Vrystaat Kunstefees/Arts Festival/Tsa-Botjhaba, a multi-artform Afrikaans language festival in Mangaung, South Africa, that forges links with Sesotho and English cultures.

## **TOURISM, THE VISIBLE, THE HIDDEN, AND THE IGNORED IN URBAN HERITAGE FESTIVALS**

**By: Ping-Ann Addo**

### **ANTHROPOLOGIST ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEING THE REAL LIVES OF THE COMMUNITIES BEHIND FESTIVALS**

World class cities, whether classically charming or rapidly gentrifying, are a draw for both tourists and festivals. Art, film, theatre, food, and music festivals, as well as sports and other leisure events, attract visitors and inspire awe and respect. But what of the people who live there, especially those whose cultures are marketed as tourist attractions to the place, the city – who recognizes, knows, and admires them? Long-standing cultural festivals may be put on official “billings” as tourist attractions, but they usually conceal more than they reveal about the people of a place.

As an anthropologist, I am interested in the place-based cultural meaning of heritage festivals – the often celebratory, usually calendrical, always commemorative occurrences that have a place in a city’s history and as forms of patrimony for specific groups of inhabitants. Heritage festivals are not simply in a place, but of a place because of who already dwells there. It is as if place produces aspects of a people that require expression in the form of a given festival.

St. Patrick’s Day (religious-cum-street parade), Lunar New Year (religious, community, and business festival), or Caribbean Carnival (political protest-cum-public “dance” parade) festivals are all celebratory happenings with an outer face and an inner heart. The public aspects of a festival – while attractive to tourists – do little to index the specifics of the everyday for these ethnic and religious communities. Do we know the struggles, resiliency, and ambitions of members of that community? Specificity matters.

Temporality also matters. Often analysts refer to festivals as “ephemera”, even though numerous ethnographers have proven that, if we are only there during a festival period, we would not likely learn of the prayers offered, financial sacrifices made, and costumes painstakingly wrought inside homes, workshops, and places of worship in order to finance or otherwise facilitate the displays in public spaces. Dropping in at festival time is not a way to experience the multi-faceted culture of a people in place. Dropping in is not culture; it is tourism.

In gentrifying cities, minority communities are invested in the myriad meanings that their heritage festivals hold, and they often genuinely welcome the visibility that festivals afford them as people of a place. Tourism may certainly produce monetary value, but tourism is rarely, in itself, a value. Moreover, while tourism as an urban (enhancement) project may benefit from heritage festivals, heritage festivals have no inherent need for tourism. Focusing on value (what one will give up to

access something, like one's festival heritage) and values (how one expresses what that heritage means), anthropologists see public performance and spectacle, to which tourists are typically drawn (or steered) as minor aspects of the unfolding story of a place. Other crucial aspects include on-going (and never static) processes of cultural creativity, political and gendered resistance, community preservation, youth expression, and vernacular education – to name just a few.

Whether we are researchers, visitors, city planners, or residents, if we use tourism as a lens onto the realities of place, we will likely find that we can barely see through the fog of our own particular concerns. Rather, if we train our lenses to the conditions that locals live under in their everyday lives, we will know that we do not know, and we might also recognize that we can always learn. We can research, recognize, and respect who local people were, are, and hope to continue to be as the city around them changes. Thus, the festival context affords us meaningful, informed ways to encounter and understand the work, culture, history, community, and face and heart of people of a place.

Ping-Ann Addo is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. She is an ethnographer whose methodologies start with the arts and whose current research focus is on interactions between ethnic community building, minority women's entrepreneurship, and place-keeping.



## II: MEDIUM-TERM STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL, REINVENTION & RENEWAL

### SPEAKERS



**Enrique Avogadro**

**Hope Azeda**



**Airan Berg**

**Kathrin Deventer**

**Joe Sidek**



*Minister of Culture of the City of Buenos Aires, Argentina*

*Founder and Artistic Director, Mashirika Performing Arts and Media Company, Rwanda*

*Artistic Director, Festival der Regionen in Upper Austria and Theater Maker, Austria*

*Secretary General, European Festivals Association, Belgium*

*Founder, George Town Festival; Festival Director, Rainforest Fringe Festival, Malaysia*

The pandemic is an acute crisis, but not the only crisis facing the festival world. Climate change, racial and economic disparities, censorship and human rights violations across the globe also plague festivals. How do festival makers navigate this landscape? Discussions on the second day focused on the struggles facing festivals beyond COVID-19 and rethinking how and why festivals exist.

Festivals must find a balance between discourse and action that allows them to be effective with the resources they have and give mandate to others to continue working beyond the festival moment. The incredible transformational power of art and the creative ideas generated when people congregate puts pressure on festivals to address a number of society's ills. This can be a paralyzing task. However, while festivals cannot achieve unlimited positive results, they can work within their means to improve their practice, fight for social justice and help build more livable and equitable communities.

***“We in the creative industry are always reinventing ourselves, we are always looking at ourselves and reimagining, even before COVID.”***

Reviewing fiscal, curatorial and evaluation models can be a useful starting point for festivals (acknowledging that not all festivals have the time, space or funds to self-reflect). Continuing global crises, social shifts, urbanization and migration will inevitably impact

artist and audience needs. As the challenges to participation change, how will festivals evolve? For instance, will traditional measures of success such as the number of events hosted or tickets sold need revisiting?

Beyond models of operation, participants suggested festivals should examine their own history. If ignored, a festival's historic relationship to colonization, displacement or prejudice can continue to infiltrate decision-making. To disrupt this process, a festival needs to understand both its community and its context. Successful curation often involves a delicate balance of celebrating tradition and encouraging experimentation, representing community and connecting to otherness.

***“Instead of searching for projects, we started to develop new relationships with our audience.”***

Developing resilient relationships is also essential. The relationships a festival holds with community leaders, governing bodies and traditional custodians of the land it uses determine the legacy and lifespan of a festival. Festivals, for the most part, are not restricted by hard infrastructure. They can take place throughout a city, shift their shape to fit different sites, change location and – as 2020 has shown – even move online. Festivals can temporarily expand the boundaries of who is permitted in public space and create valuable opportunities for exchange, paving the way for more open and vibrant societies.

***“We learn about ourselves through the confrontation with the other.”***

As was clear from the diversity of the program participants, festivals of different shapes and sizes exist in all corners of the world. Each festival is unique and the variations in how we manage and curate events means there is already a wealth of knowledge available on different methods for making or remaking festivals. Reviewing internal systems, reflecting on the past and continuing to develop mutually beneficial relationships can help guide a festival through difficult transitions, but festival makers can also learn a lot from each other. The power of the collective is important.

***“Our right to experiment has been transformed.”***

## BEYOND JANUARY 6, 2021: WHAT FUTURE FOR A FESTIVAL IN THE SHADOW OF THE CAPITOL?

By: Sabrina Lynn Motley

### DIRECTOR OF THE SMITHSONIAN FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL CONSIDERS THE 54-YEAR-OLD FESTIVAL'S FUTURE IN THE WAKE OF THE ANTIDEMOCRATIC INSURRECTION

What follows in this thought piece bears little resemblance to my original draft. The first version was buttoned up and properly edited as befitting someone who works for a storied American cultural institution. It was an ode to creativity in the face of a global pandemic, simmering civil unrest, and a bewildering number of environmental crisis. Buoyed by my time at the Salzburg Global Seminar program *What Future for Festivals?* I waxed poetic about the role of festivals in bridging, connecting, and healing. It was not prize-winning prose, but it was a sincere reflection on last year's online conversations.

And then.

On Wednesday, January 6, 2021, I found myself in digital communion with millions around the world. Together, we watched with stunned incredulity a siege on the symbolic heart of American democracy.

After hours of listening to pundits express everything from confusion to anger, my thoughts floated to festival-making. I admit that I asked myself more than once: "What is the point?" This was not just a philosophical question.

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which is currently in my care, takes place on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Since 1967, every summer save one, we have built a temporary city on the same ground where Martin Luther King, Jr. called us to the beloved community. We bring artisans, musicians, cooks, and more from all corners of the earth to share their stories along with the work of their hands and hearts. We gather hundreds of staff, interns, and volunteers to attend to the needs of our visitors onsite and online. We are also a stone's throw from the Capitol.

The very spot where we pitch our tents was the gathering point for those determined to "take back their country" with a violent disregard for the common good. So, again, my question was not existential. On that Wednesday, it felt like a line has been crossed. Is whatever good that could come from a festival worth whatever pain that will come from putting people in harm's way?

Perspective was needed and quick.



The arc of time is long and not always linear, but history is a willing teacher. Over 50 years ago, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival was created as a corrective for a country fractured by racism, inequality, and war (sound familiar?). Its founders wanted to make a point about who contributed, and was entitled, to the American promise. They understood that how we respond to the need to see and be seen, hear and be heard, would lead us to connection and healing or destruction and terror.

Then, as now, creative expression and cultural production had a vital role to play. Festivals, with their ability to shine a public light into the cervices of personal life, can bring us to meaningful—that does not always mean comfortable—encounter with people quite unlike ourselves.

To be of use, lessons from the past must be embedded into questions about what is to come.

At the first meeting of *What Future for Festivals?*, Salzburg Global Vice President Clare Shine challenged us to think about our work vis-à-vis “radical acts of reinvention.” How do we reimagine programming that sparks innovative responses to racism, intersectional discrimination, and environmental degradation as well as ignites respect, possibility and, dare I say, joy? How do we create spaces of reciprocal learning and transformative engagement?

The Salzburg Global program offered a salient reminder that the call to festival-making surfaces when we ask ourselves the kinds of questions that “inspire new thinking and action, and ... connect local innovators with global resources.” It is here, as we face interlocking injustices and deal with our collective grief, that we find a resolute power—and, ultimately, the point—of this work.

Yes. What future for festivals indeed.

Sabrina Lynn Motley is director of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and a doctoral candidate in anthropology, conducting research on the interplay between religious faith, doubt, and social activism.

## **“NATIVE CHRISTMAS” HOW FESTIVALS CAN LEAD TO CULTURAL RESURGENCE**

**By: Jason Ryle**

### **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE IMAGINATIVE FILM AND MEDIA ARTS FESTIVAL IN CANADA ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FESTIVAL IN EXPANDING AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATIONS OF FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE**

It was at an academic conference on Indigenous Futurisms at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in November 2017 where I had a profound cultural experience. By this point I had been entrenched in the Indigenous media arts sector for over a decade as the executive director of the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival.

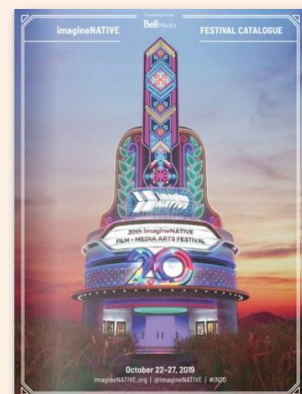
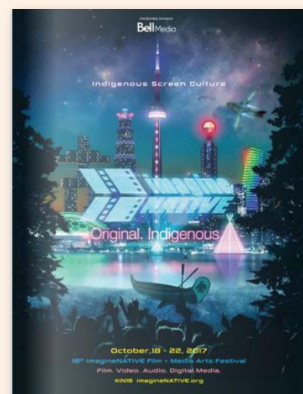
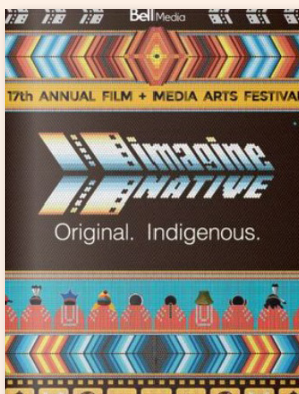
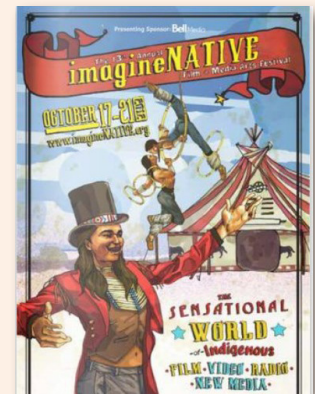
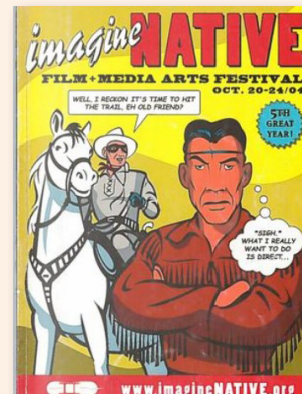
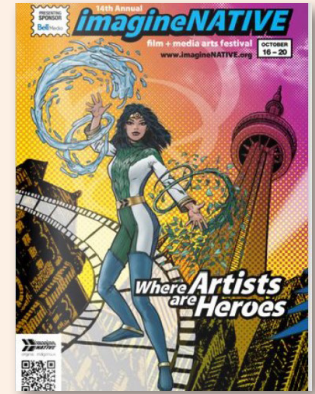
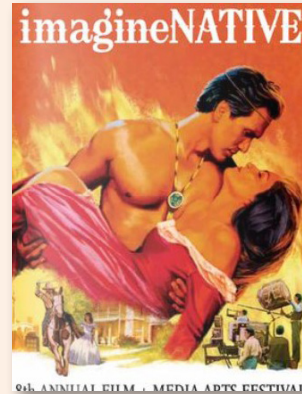
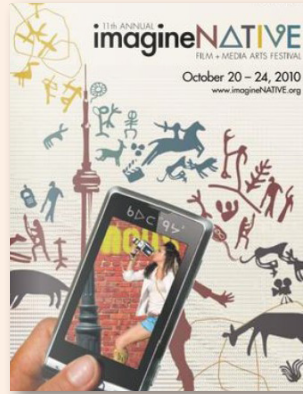
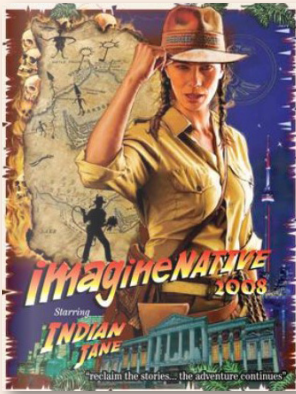
It bears mentioning, however briefly, the legacy of cultural displacement that many First Nations people in Canada endure due to European colonization of our nations. My mother's first language is Anishinaabemowin, but it is a language whose beauty and embedded cultural knowledge was not passed on to me. My mother was one of tens of thousands of Indigenous children forcibly removed from their families and cultures by the Canadian government and placed in church-run residential schools. She was six years old when she was taken. Eradication of Indigenous cultures was the goal and children were beaten for speaking their languages.

This active assimilationist practise – not widely known in Canada until recent years – has been acknowledged as a cultural genocide by the United Nations and was brutally effective in fracturing sovereign nations and causing deep traumas in generations of Indigenous families.

Part of my inheritance was a disconnection not just from my ancestral language, but also a childhood growing up with deeply harmful portrayals of Indigenous peoples on screen. Hollywood really did a number on us. News reportages were often racist. The Natives I saw on screen were nothing like me or the people I loved. Indigenous children grow up with an acute understanding of authentic representation and how to navigate global stereotypes of who we are.

This is why imagineNATIVE was founded. Since its first Festival in 2000, imagineNATIVE has been mandated to support Indigenous artists working in screen-based media and to promote Indigenous narrative sovereignty in screen storytelling. Indigenous-made cinema has long been a counter cinema to over a century of films created by non-Indigenous people, which helped establish a persistent global stereotype of who we are.

The Festival's first years were lean. Given our strict mandate to only show films whose creative lead was Indigenous, the number of eligible films was small. But the Festival and the Indigenous



media art sector grew in tandem, each nourishing the other to where imagineNATIVE now receives hundreds of eligible submissions each year. Our sector is still growing rapidly.

Back to that conference in Winnipeg and that particular afternoon where so much changed for me. A number of Indigenous youth were presenting their work and there was something so profound in what they were saying – how they were talking – that captivated me.

As someone a generation older than these teens, I realized it was the first time that I was hearing the voice of a cohort that my peers and those whose shoulders we stand upon had long been working to welcome. These were Indigenous youth who had grown up in a century with strong and numerous Indigenous role models, at a time of accelerating Indigenous artistic and cultural forward momentum, and with a wonderful diversity of Indigenous artistic expressions (a quantity that did not exist when I was young) to inform and inspire them.

This is unfathomably powerful and as significant a cultural shift as I can imagine. Their connection and relation to their cultures was different than mine, someone who had to find a way back to my Anishinaabe culture. My work as a Festival Director was a not just a means to give back to my community but also to find my place in my nation.

The Seven Fires prophecy is often in my mind. It is a centuries-old pre-colonization Anishinaabe prophecy that foretold seven epochs for the nation, including the arrival of Europeans and the apocalyptic impact on Indigenous peoples. Our current age (which began in the early 1970s) is the Seventh Fire, a time characterized by cultural renewals and resurgences. Indigenous artists and youth have been central to keeping this fire lit, and the success of events like the imagineNATIVE Festival exists within and because of this cultural context.

The Festival and the artists it presents have become a significant event for many Indigenous people not only in Toronto, but across Canada and around the world. imagineNATIVE embodies so much more than a showcase of art; in many ways, it is a reverberation and amplifier of the larger Indigenous cultural resurgence happening worldwide. A long-time attendee lovingly – and humorously – dubbed the Festival “Native Christmas” and it is an apt description. Each year, people from around the world gather at imagineNATIVE in celebration and cultural affirmation.

As the Festival’s organizers, we are committed to keeping the Seventh Fire lit, which we do for those in our communities today and, importantly, for future generations. This means we rely on a framework of Indigenous cultural values to guide our decision-making, which helps us remain responsive to our diverse Indigenous global community and, in particular, to ensuring there is meaningful space and support for Indigenous youth. It is a values-based governance structure that foregrounds kindness, generosity, the principle of reciprocity, and the practise of do no harm. And that conference in Winnipeg – on the future no less – was in so many ways as perfect a manifestation of why we do what we do.

The voices of those youth were proof to me that things had changed, and that a new foundation was being built. I am excited to see what they will do when they become leaders in our nations and have festivals of their own.

Jason Ryle is the executive director of imagineNATIVE, an Indigenous-run arts organization based in Toronto, Canada. imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival is the world’s largest showcase of film and other screen-based works created by Indigenous artists.

## FESTIVALS DECLARE EMERGENCY?

**By: Rose de Wend Fenton**

**CO-FOUNDER AND FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE LONDON INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF THEATRE (LIFT) CONSIDERS HOW FESTIVALS CAN RESPOND TO THE TRIPLE EMERGENCIES OF CLIMATE, CORONAVIRUS AND BLACK LIVES MATTER**

We are in the midst of an accelerating climate and ecological emergency.

We know that we have less than ten years to ensure global warming stays below 1.5° C. Anything beyond significantly increases the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people. The last five years since the Paris Climate agreement was signed have been the hottest on record; one million species are at risk of extinction, biodiversity is collapsing, and as I write Arctic glaciers are melting and fires are raging across the world.

COVID-19 – inextricably linked to the climate and ecological emergency – has lifted the lid more starkly on the huge inequalities, injustices and fault lines in our fractured and failing societies. Taking effective action is now accepted as an urgent priority across society. In this environment, what is the existential basis for international festivals of the future?

Throughout the ages, festivals have traditionally been a place where people have come together to celebrate what sustains them as a community, offering a pause from daily life to step back, question and re-set the world around them. They are “experimental zones of sociability” where new ideas can be explored, new futures imagined.

So how might international festivals today evolve and be part of leading the vital changes needed to decarbonize and regenerate our planet? In order to resonate and thrive, what must we relinquish, restore, and repair?

Many festivals have already taken effective actions, embedding environmental sustainability into their operations, creative work, and business practice. These include adopting an environmental policy for their organization; appointing someone in their team responsible for environmental initiatives; and creating a dedicated sustainability budget for their event. Some festivals are reporting on their carbon emissions, others are exploring the idea of adopting a “carbon budget”. How many flights, how big a company, how many productions can we afford? At the same time festivals are increasingly commissioning discussions and works from artists – many collaborating with sociologists, economists, scientists, horticulturalists – that specifically address the climate and ecological emergency, with topics ranging from climate justice to re-establishing our long-neglected relationship with nature.

Throughout the Salzburg Global Seminar program *What Future for Festivals?* (held online) there was a plea to go beyond mechanisms and production and to return to the values and vision that underpin our work. How do we get away from the ego of producers with their exclusive premieres to create more meaningful collaborations that truly interrogate the benefits festivals bring to the communities we serve, linking in with civic structures, across housing, health, education, local government and local commerce?

All agreed that the triple – and interrelated – emergencies of climate, COVID-19, and Black Lives Matter was a unique opportunity to rethink what cultural exchange means through a more equitable lens. Can we “decolonize” our festivals by inviting in co-curators and “change artists”?

The international festival model of flying in an unlimited number of artists, including whole orchestras, for two nights is irresponsible, no longer fit for purpose. Do we have to consume so much? Can we not focus less on the quantity, size and prestige of productions and more on quality of engagement with visiting artists staying for longer, creating more meaningful relationships?

And what might a new “internationalism” look like, forging alliances between the local and the international, with our digital age opening up many possibilities, both in terms of access and in creating dynamic collaborations and exchange? The potential is enormous.

Many have appreciated experiencing a different relationship to time during COVID-19 giving them an opportunity to experiment, to think in a different way. Can we hold on to this and slow down, creating space for reflection and working “at the speed of trust”?

Through coming together in solidarity and sharing best practice, the international cultural community has a significant role to play in addressing the defining issue of our lifetime. I am part of [Culture Declares Emergency](#) (CDE), a growing international movement of individual artists and organisations who have undertaken to tell the truth, take action and seek justice. Taking their lead from CDE, we have Architects Declare Emergency, Music Declares Emergency, Tourism Declares Emergency. Could there be an International Festivals Declare Emergency movement?

As international festivals we have a unique opportunity to be part of creating a regenerative future, reinventing, and reimagining our world at a time of systemic change and uncertainty. We can give voice to new narratives and contribute towards shifting societies’ values away from consumerism and commodity and towards community and collaboration. In this way we can help transform the conversation around the climate and ecological emergency and – crucially – translate it into action.

Rose de Wend Fenton is a freelance arts producer and advisor. She co-founded the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) in 1980 and was its co-director for 25 years.

### III: DESIGNS ON THE FUTURE

#### SPEAKERS



**Jordi Albareda**



**Ahmed El Attar**



**Rose Fenton**



**Veronika Liebl**

*Founder and Director, FairSaturday, Spain*

*Director, Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival, Egypt*

*Freelance Arts Producer and Advisor, UK*

*Co-Director, Ars Electronica Festival;*

*Director of Organization/Finance Ars Electronica Festival/*

*Prix/Exhibitions, Austria*

The forced break in our regular cycle of festival programming provides an unanticipated opportunity to think about the future. In the third catalytic conversation, participants questioned the desire or even the ability to return to “normality” and wondered if festivals might have different priorities moving forward. Many questioned the pre-COVID-19 status quo, asking if the systems in place were really working and – if so – for whom they were working.

To a certain extent, COVID-19 was regarded as a catalyst – a canary in the coalmine – for highlighting the systemic injustices in how festivals operate (which are often a reflection of the injustices seen in society at large). In designing the future of festivals, participants wondered if it was possible to find solutions that work for all festivals – regardless of size, geographic location, art form or focus – as well as solutions that help heal the planet and its inhabitants.

**“What is the value we bring to our community? How might we link in with civic structures across housing, health, education, local government and local commerce?”**

Participants were keen to revisit and reflect more deeply on festival values. Valuations based on product or traditional economic capital cannot be the only method for assessing a festival’s worth. While festivals can generate wealth, linking a festival’s value exclusively to economic gains is flawed (as the phenomenon of over-tourism has shown). Indeed, if this were the case and a festival’s value was solely determined by fiscal output through, say, tickets sold or tourism generated, then the logic would be to only program the most

commercially successful acts. The incentive would be to maximize audience numbers regardless of ecological damage and limit risk by abandoning niche or experimental art. Festivals can and do have economic value, but this cannot be the only way we measure and evaluate their contributions.

Festivals generate social capital. This kind of capital allows people to function in society through a perceived common culture. Social capital creates a sense of trust that fosters social cohesion, encourages empathy and prevents civil unrest. The essence of festivals brings people together; it is an invaluable task and should be as relevant to sustainable business models as economic capital.

So, what does the future of festivals look like? Participants shared their concerns around their ability to create empathy in a digital space and talked of the critical need to rebuild bridges between artists and audiences. There was a desire to compromise and collaborate both within the festival industry and across disciplines, acknowledging that there are lessons to be learnt from other sectors. New and unusual partnerships will be essential moving forward as will the urgent need to decarbonize our practice. The impact of climate change must be a primary concern for festivals – indeed for all sectors – when designing future models.

***“I love many, many festivals worldwide, but some of them have lost the essence of their beginnings ... I think the future of festivals should be going back to the essence of beauty, to the essence of how culture has helped us to go deeper, not faster, but to go better, and to go together.”***

PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES  
TO AN ONLINE SURVEY  
CONDUCTED MID-PROGRAM



## AWAKING TO THE DIFFERENT INTERNATIONAL AND THE DIFFERENT LOCAL

By: Ong Keng Sen

### ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THEATREWORKS AND FOUNDER OF THE INTERNATIONAL CURATORS ACADEMY IN SINGAPORE ON RETURNING FESTIVALS TO THEIR ORIGINS

Since we crashed into the iceberg of the pandemic, our worlds have been incessantly talking about “the new normal.” How will this new normal affect festivals in particular?

Festivals began in many parts of the world as gatherings of humans coming together to celebrate, to grieve, to discuss. In Asia where I come from, the festival is inextricably linked to rituals: human acts to express the self, the community, and our place in the larger cosmos of both the visible and the invisible. These human acts communicate in different ways but most of all, they are small actions of personal agency contributing to a desired or needed transformation in the world of the living. These rituals are often about the world of the living coming to terms with death, the death of the body, the death in nature, as well as the arrival of new life, regeneration, and sustenance.

Today, our festivals are often about ticket sales, festival subscriptions, city fireworks, opening night gala events, professional management models, and the networking opportunities for stakeholders. In 2019, when I attended a gathering of aspiring festival managers and directors, I was struck that the vision of the successful festival had been reduced worldwide to a generic formula of audience numbers, event count, and box office as the main performance indicators. This permeated down to the projection of the festival through its video advertising or end report, designed to convince all eyeballs of its success. As a former founding festival director, I have also been embroiled in this game. It is a challenge to intervene and supplement with other considerations.

The pandemic can be a cut that allows us to rethink, reimagine, reconnect the festival back to its ancient roots of human gathering, as well as the power of human beings and their personal agency to affirm life, transformation, and sustainability. This involves us shaking off the superficial trappings of festivals we have accumulated thus far. A useful series of questions to rethink the future internationalization (and the new localization) of a festival can be:

- What does the international bring to your festival? Why is it vital for your festival? Or is it window-dressing, a status symbol?
- Due to the challenge of international travel during pandemic times, you have only 1-3 opportunities for international interventions in your next festival (overall the pandemic means a much-reduced international curation for your festival). How will you prioritize the international elements necessary to your festival? Do you have a mission statement or a manifesto of values to

guide this setting of priorities?

- How can you suggest shifts to your local curation, to open it up as a comparative study of other local contexts? Can the local be a renewed and porous lens for future international exchange, for instance an international festival consisting of diverse and multiple local contexts energizing each other? In this way, perhaps the post-pandemic festival can avoid the inevitable brand names which circulate and dominate international arts festivals.
- In general, can the future internationalization of festivals interweave with local contexts to create a braid of the international and the local, each informing and nurturing the other? How can this interweaving be vitally installed in the DNA of the festival, from its inception to the manifestation?
- Can the digitalization of parts of the festival and some of its processes enrich this interweaving discourse between the new international and the new local?

Inevitably thinking through the international and the local also involves decolonizing the festival from either the international market or the local politics. The colonizing forces of the “international standard” homogenize local expression to insist on a global product, rather than an approach that defines localities, communities, histories, archives, and traditions. Conversely the colonizing forces of “the local” limit and censor the community through fear, rather than airing viewpoints through differences, multiplicities, and discussion that the international may bring. This expanded perspective of colonization asks: “How can we be vigilant to the constant process of decolonizing, for colonization is never a thing of the past but continues to insidiously bore itself into our very beings?”

Is there perhaps a way of decolonizing the festival through cultivating audience ownership as audiences are by nature different and singular, amongst a plural “we” rather than a “we” denoting an exclusive identity.

It is definitely a race against time, as the vaccine begins to be rolled out in 2021. Will the vaccine render all of the questions above moot? Perhaps the real value of the pandemic has been the non-production, the process, the hesitation, the questioning, all that is deemed inefficient, non-efficacious. Once jolted, we can never be the same again.

Keng Sen Ong is an artistic director of TheatreWorks and the artspace 72-13 in Singapore. He is also founder of the Arts Network Asia, a micro-grant peer organization, and the international Curators Academy focused on the synergies between contexts and curation in Asia.

## **THE FUTURE OF MEGA-EVENTS... AND FESTIVALS' CRUCIAL ROLE IN SUCH FUTURE**

**By: Beatriz Garcia**

**DIRECTOR OF CC:RO | CITIES OF CULTURE RESEARCH OBSERVATORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL EXPLAINS WHY THE FUTURE OF MEGA-EVENTS LIKE THE OLYMPICS IS TIED TO THE FUTURE OF FESTIVALS**

The arrival of COVID-19 has transformed the world we live in and put all major cultural events and festivals on hold. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics have been postponed. The 2020 Edinburgh Festival was cancelled. The hosting of European Capitals of Culture across the EU is requiring careful reinvention. Fashion weeks, art biennials, theatre and film festivals everywhere are exploring their virtual options.

After a year spent largely in isolation, with solace being sought increasingly online, discussions have grown about our human need for culture and festivities that involve large physical gatherings – but also about the need to rethink the way we host festivals and collective encounters. I would like to reflect here about how these considerations affect the largest players of all: global mega-events.

### **THE VIEWS ON MEGA-EVENTS**

In a recent public lecture I asked the question: Can we live without mega-events? and some may want to argue that, actually, we can – or even, we should. Long-held criticisms against mega-events such as the Olympic Games, World Cups or World Expos are the view that they are wasteful, inherently unsustainable, prone to corruption and insensitive to local differences by imposing top-down global frameworks.

However, there is another side to this debate. Mega-events are credited with the capacity to take over their host environment and generate precious moments of collective encounter – “once-in-a-lifetime” experiences that contribute to shaping identity as well as meaningful and, most importantly, shared local, national and global narratives. Mega-events are celebrated as opportunities to portray and advance universal values thanks to their unsurpassed international media appeal.

### **THE CHALLENGE GOING FORWARDS**

Naturally, in the wake of 2020 and the near-collapse of so many long-existing festivals, tough questions need to be asked. There is a need to prioritise, to be selective and accept that “carrying on as usual” is no longer an option. The pandemic has accelerated our pre-existing concerns over the future of events and festivals at large.



## **WHAT WE KNEW**

In response to widespread criticisms, the mega-event industry (in particular, the Olympic Games) has been working for decades towards prioritizing sustainability, accountability and ethics. Initiatives such as the Olympic Agenda 2020 are evidence of the seriousness with which key priorities such as legacy, transparency of operations and local sensitivity have been taken since the turn of the millennium.

## **WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED IN 2020**

On top of these commitments, the pandemic has shone a light on additional priorities that can no longer be postponed. I would argue that they involve a combination of symbolic and operational priorities.

On the symbolic front, mega-event stakeholders have come to appreciate better the value of investing in optimistic while credible grand narratives. For this, deep cultural sensitivities are essential. With the news cycle worldwide dominated by an incessant sense of doom – and its effect on people's anxiety, mistrust in government and fear of anyone perceived as a stranger – there is a growing need for positive and transnational community-building. There is increasing demand for enabling globally significant moments that send signs of hope. The question is: who has the credibility required to project such moments? Can the original message of the Tokyo Olympic Games – the “Reconstruction Games” – translate into a global message that the world – i.e. the 206 participating Olympic nations – can genuinely get behind? This is a key aspiration behind the new version of the Games Opening Ceremony scheduled for August 2021.

On the operational front, key priorities are the capacity to be generous (those with resources must count on and support those without), the need to build trust (share new emerging knowledge, share concerns, act collectively, commit to networks) and the need to return to values as the driving force behind mega-event hosting processes. Mission statements must be connected to a long-term, value-driven (as opposed to an immediate output-driven) vision.

These priorities – generosity, trust, values – are in fact some of the most valuable keywords emerging from our Salzburg Global program What Future for Festivals?.

## **THE FUTURE OF MEGA-EVENTS...**

The mega-events of the future cannot justify themselves on the back of numbers alone. There is no longer a global acceptance of physical infrastructure investments as a key legacy with equal benefits for all: the general public – and event stakeholders, in general – want the stories as well, and they want them to be meaningful.

For these reasons, mega-events of the future need their festival dimension more than ever: they need their cultural rationale, their artists as core contributors. People want an Olympic Opening Ceremony that has true artistic integrity, not just grand spectacle; people want to be inspired by human excellence and want the stories behind our greatest achievements around the world (in sport, in industry, in arts or in science) to be told with care as well as imagination, being presented in responsible, sustainable – even intimate – ways.

In return, mega-events must also support and contribute to the future of smaller, more diverse and locally rooted festivals. The global networks (sponsors, broadcasters) that remain committed to investing billions of dollars in mega-events should accept clauses involving a commitment towards proportional support for the kinds of grassroots activities that make mega-events meaningful in the first place.

After a year when everything has been put on hold, we must accept the deep interdependences that make our cultural life possible. The kinds of once-in-a-generation collective euphoria that mega-events aspire to generate will not emerge on the back of computer-generated graphics and closed-doors sporting and industry exchanges. Such euphoria – and the life-long shared memories it engenders – can only emerge out of meaningful encounters involving truly diverse creative practices; a deep understanding of specific places and communities; and thoughtful, well-informed platforms for storytelling, building on the broad range of international expertise and backgrounds shaped by decades of hands-on, location-based work around the globe. For this, the grand global players need the small locally based players.

The future of mega-events is completely tied to (and dependent on) the future of festivals.

Beatriz Garcia is the Director of CC:RO | Cities of Culture Research Observatory at the University of Liverpool. She is a member of the European Capital of Culture Selection Committee, nominated by the European Commission; and expert member at the Culture and Olympic Heritage Commission, nominated by the International Olympic Committee.

## CAN FESTIVALS HELP US IMAGINE A FUTURE AGAIN?

**By: Monica Sassatelli**

### CULTURAL SOCIOLOGIST ON HOW FESTIVALS CAN HELP US FACE UP TO RISK AND UNCERTAINTY

When asked “what future for festivals?” I would like to shift the attention to the part of the question that we are likely to take for granted. That seems to me to be the very notion of future. The recent crises, the pandemic and maybe more so the climatic crisis, seem to question the possibility of there being a future at all.

Even in the Salzburg Global Seminar program, *What Future for Festivals?* we say “future,” but we often mean “risk.” Ulrich Beck, the sociologist who proposed the idea of “risk society” would have found confirmation here: we live in a society of risk and risk management. What qualifies ours as a risk society is not an increased amount of risk, but the pervasive quality of risk control. We have lost certainty forever; therefore, we need to learn to co-exist, consciously, with uncertainty. We need a “culture of uncertainty.” Uncertainty and freedom are inextricably linked.

In other words, our world may not be more dangerous than previous eras, but danger and risk are not the same thing: risk is danger plus awareness and future-orientation to measure and control it. Risk is danger to be administered; to control risk a certain amount of freedom will be sacrificed, more or less willingly.

A society oriented to risk management is, in a sense, future-oriented but past-conditioned and often conservative. This is a necessary and even empowering stance: we are aware of risks today and to deny them would be irresponsible. There is no going back to innocence. However, this attitude has its own blind spot and dangers: a major one is that the future becomes just a matter of risk assessment, and freedom always confined in a zero-sum game with safety.

If you are now asking yourself “what else could it be?” then you are definitely a child of the risk society. I would like instead to try and shift the perspective a bit, to try and see a (different) future again.

Future conceived as risk to be managed is definitely one notion of future, perhaps the dominant notion of future. This is particularly the case from the standpoint not of those institutions invested with the responsibility of risk management, but instead from the standpoint of institutions invested with producing new meaning – that is cultural institutions. Within these, festivals may have a prominent role, due to their character of exceptionality, rule-breaking and collective effervescence.

With respect to our specific question: the issue is not just to imagine what future for festivals (how

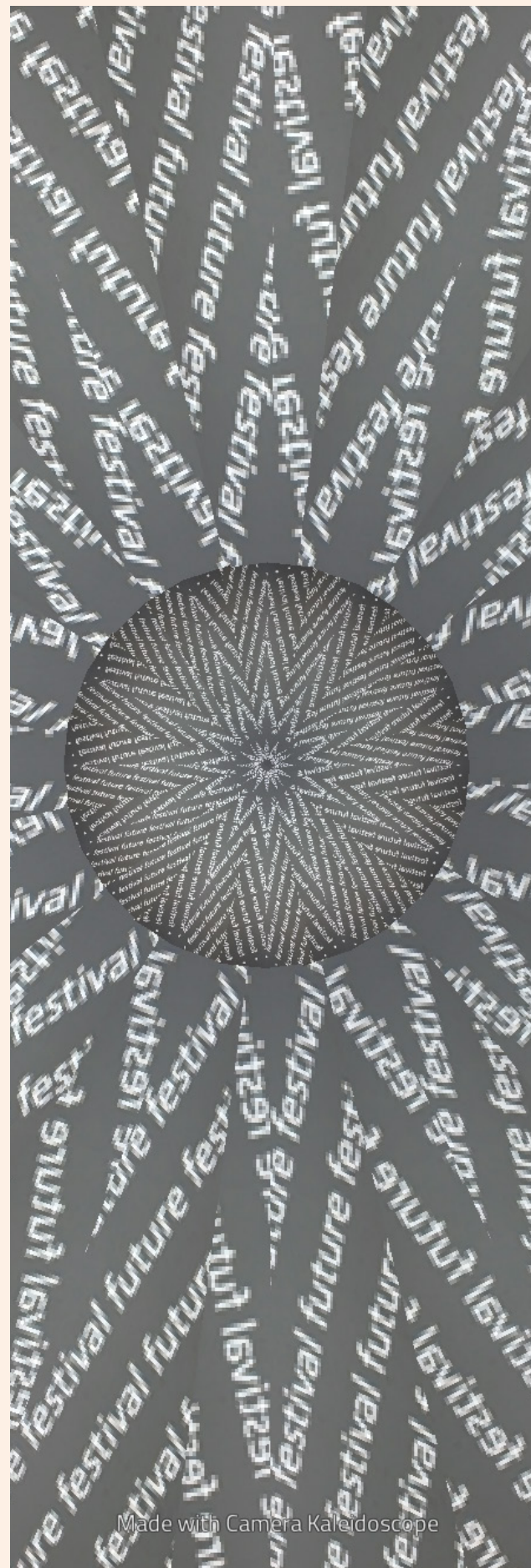
to manage the risks that festivals inevitably face, which of course must be done). But also: how, through festivals, we can imagine a future again, how festivals can create a space to energize their communities enough to imagine a future, to want a future, to celebrate a future we cannot yet even imagine, let alone manage.

That is the function anthropologists attribute to traditional celebrations, a liminal space of social effervescence where society is both unmade and made anew, or where at least we have a representation of that, an aesthetic glimpse, and a release as well.

We can make relevant here what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai recently said about the idea of future: at its core is the capacity to imagine and aspire to a better life. To do so means shifting from a politics of probability – the management of risks – to one of possibility – strengthening imagination and aspiration as a cultural capacity.

We need to face the current risks. But we also need a new culture of the future. Festivals, as cultural platforms of experimentation and celebration have a key role to play in expanding this cultural capacity, the capacity to aspire and imagine.

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Made with Camera Kaleidoscope

## FOCUS GROUPS

Participants proposed three focus group topics based on themes that emerged from the catalytic conversations. These sessions were designed to offer participants more action-oriented and in-depth engagement with the key challenges facing festivals in smaller groups. Group leaders proposed key topics for the participants to discuss and led the group through the discussion, engaging in challenging and playful debates. The findings below are summaries of the working notes provided by each group.

### I: LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY AND NEW WAYS OF DOING BUSINESS

#### KEY TOPICS

- Strengthening relationships with community and enlarging audiences in that community.
- Envisioning business models with special focus on economically feasible co-operations between festivals and artists.
- Creating new experiences for artists and audiences.
- Diversifying networks, audiences and business models.
- Extending experimentation from the front end (festival programming) to the back end (festival organization).

In addressing strategies for long-term sustainability and rethinking business models, there are two central ideas:

- Festivals need a strong sense of purpose.
- Festivals need to be able to collaborate, whether through co-creation, partnership building or working across disciplines.

In order to change a festival, a festival must first want to change. Festivals need to be able to look at their strengths and weaknesses, question infrastructure and work through challenges without egos getting in the way.

Festivals will often experiment with programming models in an attempt to reach different audiences or showcase new artworks, but perhaps this ability to experiment should be

extended to operational practices as well. Staff structures and business models could benefit from the creative thinking used to build programs.

The limited temporal presence of festivals means one of the key challenges facing the industry is how to turn short-term events into long-term community engagement and partnerships. Festivals often need to work year-round with partners and stakeholders, understanding their needs during non-festival times. This might involve working with schools, local businesses or other institutions with a permanent presence in the community.

Festivals might also want to reframe their business models knowing a business model solely dependent on financial profit is unsustainable. Festivals contribute to society through myriad different ways, such as preserving cultural traditions. There may be parts of a festival deliberately designed not to maximize economic gain but instead provide social value. Festivals need business models to reflect this practice.

To address structural change and rework business models, festivals might benefit from adapting practices used by other sectors. Other fields, both within the arts and culture industry and outside of it, face similar challenges and barriers to engaging stakeholders and communities. Festivals should not only be open to learning and exchanging with each other, but also to cross-disciplinary collaborations.

The Long-Term Sustainability Focus Group presented part of their findings using a **MURAL BOARD [GO TO >>]**

Goals, strategies and measures were tagged and visually arranged around three key spheres of influence: the social, the economic and the organizational.

## FINDINGS BY

|                             |                                                                                                    |
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# Salzburg Global Seminar: What Future for Festivals?

## Long Term Sustainability and New Ways of Doing Business

Contributors: Jordi Albareda, Angele Galea, Tisa Ho, Yulija Kozlovets, Martin Posta, Johannes Schwaninger, Kenneth Uphopho, Valentyna Zotova

### KEY FACTORS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

strengthening relationships with our community and enlarge audiences within that community

envison business models with special focus on economically feasible co-operations b/w festival and artists

creating new experiences for artists and audiences

diversification of networks, audiences, business models, etc

extending experimentation from the front end (ie festival programming) to the back end (ie festival organization)



"When it comes to collaborations, curators need to put aside their egos."

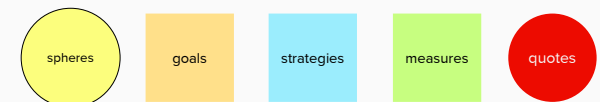
"Festivals need to convert short term into long term."

"Complete economic autonomy is not possible, we will always rely to some extent on institutional and corporate funding."

"Festivals need to be open to learn from & adapt practices of other fields, such as science, education, and technology."

"Very often, festivals started out as experimentations and later turned into structures and institutions. Maybe it's time to re-experiment."

### LEGEND



## II: RADICAL REIMAGINATION OF FESTIVALS: REDEFINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITIES AND STAKEHOLDERS

### KEY TOPICS

- How do we define a festival's community?
- How are stakeholders changing? Are there new stakeholders?
- How do we consider or redefine success for a festival moving forward?
- What should stay the same? What is the core of a festival?

The understandings of “community” pose many open questions. In particular the problem of how to attend to different communities, how to prioritize different communities and how to position the festival with respect to shifting communities. Festivals are part of society and, as society shifts, the position and role of a festival shifts too.

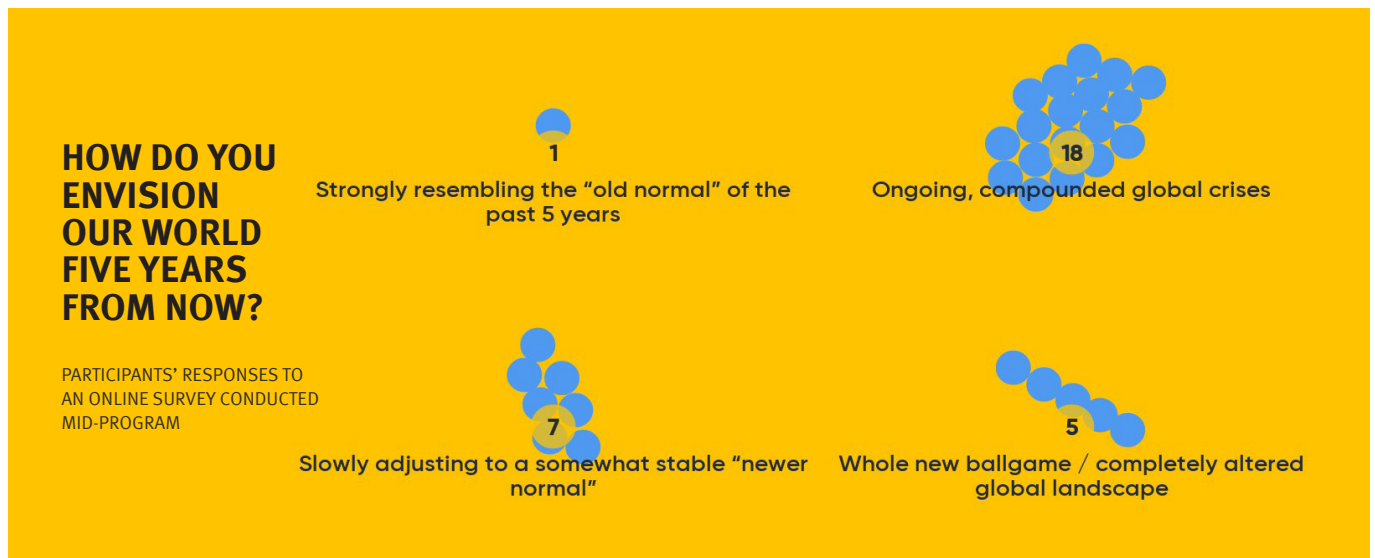
Taking into consideration the perspective of the funders (as community members or otherwise), a few key points are:

- The future is not just in our hands, there are many factors and agencies, and adaptability is key.
- Decision-making has to be shared, even if that is difficult.
- For structural reasons, it can be difficult for public funders to innovate.
- Trust collective emotional intelligence and share ownership.

Sharing ownership must go hand in hand with taking responsibility, i.e., sharing accountability. It is important to promote flat hierarchies in the managing of festivals, but also stress the ultimate responsibility rests with festival leadership. Artistic directors can and must use their skills to create narratives with their communities and stakeholders, and to build and maintain important relationships.

Questions about the truths we want to uphold and the narratives we want to challenge are vital to reimagining festivals:

- How do you curate content and create new systems to address misrepresentation, underrepresentation and colonization?
- Always ask the question of why and who are we doing this for?



This issue of evaluation is also important. Evaluation becomes a problem when it is added at the end; instead, evaluation should be integrated from the beginning. Evaluations must also take into account the social context of festivals when measuring success. For many festivals (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic), success might be survival.

As a beleaguered industry continues to struggle with the effects of COVID-19:

- Do we keep going or should we actively make the decision to stop, regroup and rebuild?
- There is a great pressure and expectation to be annual, how does this affect sustainability and survival in this current or future reality?

Ultimately, it might make sense for festivals to pause and take the time they need to ensure their sustainability and survival. Stakeholders (primarily funders, but also communities) should honor and support that decision.

## FINDINGS BY

|                             |                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
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| <b>Joe Sidek</b>            | <i>Founder, George Town Festival;<br/>Festival Director, Rainforest Fringe Festival, Malaysia</i> |

### III: RADICAL REIMAGINATION OF FESTIVALS: WHAT WILL INTERNATIONALIZATION LOOK LIKE IN THE FUTURE?

#### KEY TOPICS

- **New Internationalism:** How do the international elements in your festival interweave with the local elements? What does the international component bring to your festival? Why is it important?
- **Role of Digital:** What is the role and impact of the digital within your festivals? What is lost, what is gained? What are the opportunities for the future?
- **Core Values and Principles:** What core values and principles might you highlight in a radical reimagining of your festival?
- **Mapping Festivals:** How do we do this and what are the key questions we might ask festivals in order to map them?

International programming is an effective tool for cultural diplomacy and building connections between different communities. It also provides an opportunity to work across borders and expand a festival's reach, but this process requires time and trust. Internationalism can also be linked to the on-going processes of de-colonization, a practice that must be continuous, requiring constant work and self-reflection.

Questions of power play a significant role in international programming, not just in terms of representation and narrative control but also around who has the opportunity to participate in internationalization.

Radical approaches for internationalization:

- Co-funding festivals in international locations; what would be a fair exchange, what impact would it have on resources and power dynamics?
- Collaborations with other festivals in other locations looking at similar demographics and asking similar questions.
- Festivals becoming mixed live and digital streaming festivals.
- Working with “international locals” to develop global-facing programs domestically.

Does digitalization open the door for more internationalization? The measure of success for moving festivals online seems overwhelmingly attached to audience reach, i.e., an increase in views or access to a previously unreached demographic. This is important and

opens the door to internationalism for festivals and artists who may have previously been unable to work internationally. But is bigger better? The digital sphere is crowded with creators and consumers. How radical is transferring content online if institutions continue to struggle with representation, access and community building?

At the end of the day, online or in-person, local or international – do festivals need to stay true to their values when financial survival is at stake? For example, will taking sponsorship money from oil companies when one of your principles is working to decarbonize and raise awareness of the climate emergency ultimately undermine your mission?

Of course, not all festivals are in a position to turn down funding. All festivals need funds – sometimes from controversial sponsors – to survive, to pay their staff and their artists in order for those people to put food on the table. So, are ethics a privilege available to those with sufficient resources or do we all have the right to put ethics first? Could survival or caring for community be considered as values and can values ever be completely divorced from economics?

## FINDINGS BY

|                                |                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
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## MAPPING FESTIVALS

The debate and range of perspectives in the Future of Internationalism Focus Group (and throughout the entire program) inspired a festival mapping exercise, looking at the different components to festivals, what they share and where they differ.

### COMPONENTS

- Mission/goals/vision
- Values
- Scope/Mandate
- Languages
- Genres
- Geography
- Budget capacity
- Curatorial methodology
- Lifespan
- Organizational structure and governance
- Audience demographics
- Environmental impact

### QUESTIONS

- How does the festival support the arts ecosystem and what is its responsibility for culture where it exists?
- What are the social and political contexts and how does the festival respond?
- What are barriers and challenges to realizing your vision?
- What are the strategies you have used to overcome them?

Participants suggested mapping festivals would provide a framework for developing partnerships among festivals and encourage solidarity. The exercise would allow festivals to share best practice and build networks based on a common understanding and trust. In addition to peer learning, mapping festivals would provide festival makers with an understanding of their festival's purpose. It might allow delivery teams and stakeholders to reflect on their own practice and could be used to guide decision making in regard to programming, staffing and fundraising.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE(S) OF FESTIVALS

Throughout the program, participants reflected on the possible futures for festivals and what approaches they would need to undertake, not only to ensure the survival of their festivals, but also to inspire and focus action for social change.

What ideas and actions will shape the future of festivals? How will festivals balance caring for their immediate community with caring for the larger festival industry? Will they share finite resources? Will they prioritize equality, decarbonization or survival? What stories will they tell and who will their stakeholders, allies and accomplices be?

### KEY REFLECTIONS AND STRATEGIES

- Festival makers understand the importance of bringing people together, but festivals are often in competition with each other over premieres, venues, audiences, etc. The sector needs to work more collectively and responsibly and invest time in collaboration.
- The idea of “communities of practice” usually refers to artists (as opposed to audience or funders). However, all stakeholders should have some form of ownership in a festival and therefore be part of the community of practice.
- There must be a reciprocal approach to care and support within the festival sector: festival makers need to understand who cares for their festival and invest in those stakeholders (whether that is artists, audience, local community members or funders). In turn, these stakeholders will continue to care about and invest in the festival.
- If aims and outcomes need to be revisited when festival values change in response to social shifts, all stakeholders need to be part of this conversation. Festivals wishing to experiment with programming, to downsize or decarbonize events, engage different audiences or adjust business models, should proactively include their community in decision-making.
- Technological innovations and digitalization allowed festivals to continue to serve their communities and reach new audiences during the COVID-19 crisis. However, while this process can enhance the festival experience it cannot replace the power of assembly and face-to-face contact.
- Just as culture has declared emergency in response to the climate crisis, festivals could declare emergency and work together to build concrete and equal strategies for decarbonizing.

- Longer residencies and coordinated tours could be used as models for balancing the benefits of international arts with the damaging effects of air travel.
- Festivals need to rethink internationalism beyond showcasing the trendiest acts touring the circuit. There is a need to understand how internationalism relates to a festival's mission and value, for instance, through engaging multiple locals.
- Festivals need to constantly work to decolonize and stop colonizing. Festivals control the narratives and stories they share with their community and need to understand whose stories are being told.
- Mapping festivals can be a useful way to understand and reflect on practice and community as well as a way to build networks, share strategies and foster collaboration.
- Festivals are playful and joyful. Festivals experiment and take risks. Festivals celebrate beauty. Festivals fight for equality and social justice. Festivals build community and trust. Festivals are places of learning, understanding and debate. Festivals offer new experiences. Festivals are vectors for change. Festivals share stories, histories, land, art, food and freedom. Festivals will continue this work in the future.

## WHAT WORD DESCRIBES YOUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF FESTIVALS?

PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO  
AN ONLINE SURVEY CONDUCTED  
MID-PROGRAM



## CONCLUSION

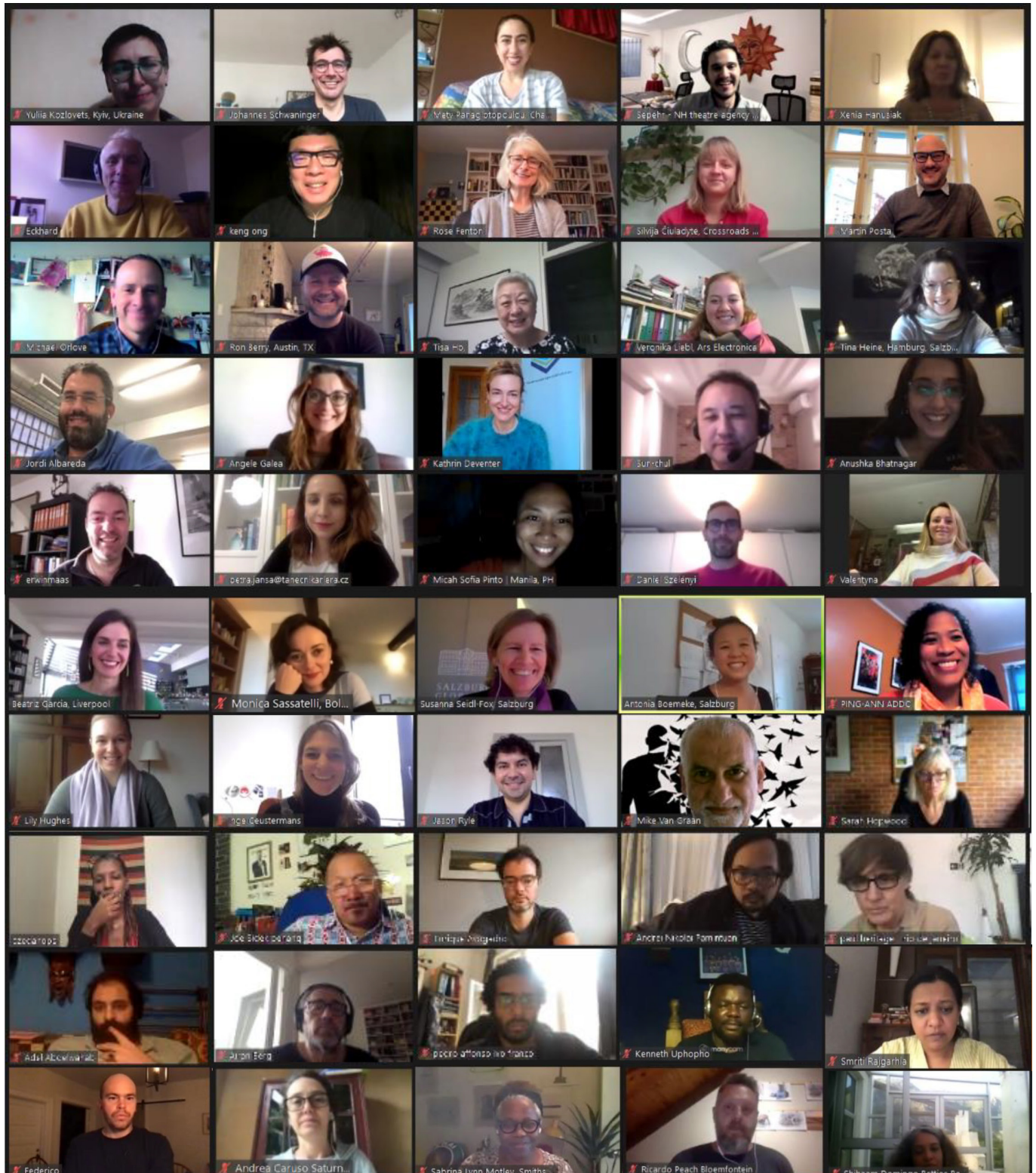
The *What Future for Festivals?* program was designed to support the festival industry through both the unprecedented struggles resulting from COVID-19 and the numerous ongoing challenges involved in building festival worlds. The plenary sessions and focus groups provided a space for festival makers to come together, a space to pause and reflect on the past, address the present crisis and plan collective strategies for the future. The program offered wide ranging and thought-provoking conversations as well as specific case studies and engaging debate on the practice of festival making. Participants shared their unique perspectives and together discerned what actions would define the future of festivals.

Festivals are incredibly diverse events, defined by their particular contexts and realized through unique curatorial choices. Yet, despite the differences that were evident among those participating in this session, there was immense value in the creative knowledge exchange facilitated by Salzburg Global Seminar. This exchange allowed participants to share strategies for survival and explore how a more collaborative festival sector might offer an innovative and sustainable future for festivals. The opportunity to learn from those experiencing similar challenges across the globe or those serving similar communities in different ways benefits everyone. A united festival sector would also be better able to advocate for arts and culture, both internationally and at home.

COVID-19 has significantly disrupted the festival world. The health crisis and consequent economic collapse combined with domestic and international restrictions on gathering and travel has laid waste to the infrastructure of festivals. The task of rebuilding lies ahead, and festival makers must choose what they want to repair and what they need to replace.

Festivals and their stakeholders need new kinds of collaboration, solidarity and internationalism. Fortunately, festivals provide the perfect playground for experimentation. It may take time to perfect new practices and adapt to doing things differently but perhaps there is value in slowing down.

With a balance of skepticism and optimism participants concluded that while festivals cannot escape the structural inequalities of the world they inhabit, they can build portals to other realities. Through this process, festivals help to imagine – and eventually create – a safer, happier and healthier world. Festivals can help us take better care of the earth and better care of each other. Through the practice of festival making, we can build a better-connected world and create a sustainable, inclusive and egalitarian vision for the future.



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## **SALZBURG GLOBAL SEMINAR**

Salzburg Global Seminar is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1947 to challenge current and future leaders to shape a better world. Our multi-year program series aim to bridge divides, expand collaboration and transform systems.

Salzburg Global convenes outstanding talent across generations, cultures and sectors to inspire new thinking and action, and to connect local innovators with global resources. We foster lasting networks and partnerships for creative, just and sustainable change.

Over 38,000 Fellows from more than 170 countries have come together through our work, with many rising to senior leadership positions. Our historic home at Schloss Leopoldskron in Salzburg, Austria – now also an award-winning hotel – allows us to welcome all participants in conditions of trust and openness.

## **CULTURE, ARTS AND SOCIETY**

The Culture, Arts and Society series harnesses the transformative power of the arts to shape a better world. Through future-focused programs and projects, it raises the profile of culture and the arts in policy agendas, catalyzes exchange across disciplines and sectors, and sustains a unique creative community across continents.

For more info. please visit:  
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