

Not afraid to be an Alien

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I will start my speech by saying how happy I felt yesterday evening understanding that there is still long life ahead for cultural networking in Europe.

For having being involved in networking activities for 15 years now, I heard much about the post networking 'era' and about the imminent collapse of European networks. Well, that was a wrong hypothesis and it seems even more so if we consider that European cultural networking succeeded in changing, in a radical way since the 80's, the stiff diplomatic vocabulary and the sometimes too conservatory cooperation practices of cultural and artistic interaction. TransEuropeHalles is, in this respect, a brilliant example of networking reshaping and reinvestment (I do not believe there are even other cultural networks in Europe that had 60 meetings since their foundation).

Of course, this optimism concerning the networking process might be due to the fact that I myself am a committed networker and even what can be called a 'network groopie'.

The encounter with TEH this time also helped in providing the right word for giving a definition to mobility, and this is: 'not being afraid to be an Alien'. The first effect mobility has is to render oneself aware that for the others you are a stranger, whatever the positive and negative connotations this might have. Of course, an artist is, by definition, an Alien, a stranger, this meaning that mobility should not change much for him, in principle. Moreover, the notion of 'emerging artist' can sound pleonastic; because artists that are not constantly emerging cannot be any longer called artists; artists should feel 'everlastingly emergent'!

Why, then, is mobility so important today and artistic mobility even more than other? And why should it be encouraged and supported?

Assessing the need for artistic mobility was one of the hard challenges for European networks and arguments in favour of it are not missing. But they are mostly, as lately advanced, expressed via the fundamentally administrative kind of vocabulary officials can read and, thus, remain external to some of the important outcomes of the mobility process itself.

I would advance here a number of different reasons in support of mobility, that might deserve consideration:

First, mobility is necessary because we live in a world that gives us the illusion that we know and sets up for us in a subtle way a battery of stereotypes that are very hard to break. Mobility is the only dynamics capable to render us back the conscience that we don't know and that certitudes can be dangerous and imprisoning. Artistic mobility is capable to deliver us from the ongoing pressure of the rationally pre-constructed, sliced, realities of the present world and helps us rediscover our emotional common ground. It is much more humanly enriching to 'go global' through emotional sharing, than through the free market outcomes.

Second, mobility is necessary to help us continue to feel insecure. As much of a paradox as this might seem, feeling insecure is a pre-condition of feeling fragile, open, sensitive and attentive. We are too much today under the belief that total security really exists, that we can be safe! Or, from time to time, one needs to render oneself humbly to the world and to encounter new audiences, take new challenges and feel, whatever his age and recognition level, as an emergent, fragile, emotionally alive, 'unsafe' artist. Thinking oneself too secure might mean also becoming creatively dead.

Thirdly, mobility helps us understand not only what we are as compared to others (by that, I mean our identity as 'Alien'), but mostly helps us discover where do we belong. In his last book, 'The curtain' (le Rideau), Milan Kundera is making a strong and touching plea on behalf of the fact that the European novel is a territory in itself, bringing together Kafka, Swift, Joyce and Thomas Mann. For Kundera, it is out of the ideas circulation between different generations of different nationalities of European novelists that the modern literature took life (and in it, reflected the social and philosophical mark of the European spiritual values). Hence, an artist's identity is not French, Irish or German, but belongs to the spiritual territory of the novel in Europe. This perspective can help us support the approach to mobility of emergent artists, who have to get the right idea where they belong to with their minds, not with their passports and ID's.

Re-empowering the artists voice in cultural policy can also start from this kind of understanding.

Last, but not least, mobility helps us discover how to be in our element. In his book, 'Out of our Minds', Ken Robinson points out: 'many people are displaced from their own, true, capacities. They do not realise their potential because they do not know what it is. They function 'out of their minds'. Mobility could, in this sense, provide ground for bringing us back to ourselves, through encountering the others, like in the Alice in wonderland 'through the mirror' effect.

All this being said, one has to observe, however the facts: physical mobility is difficult and often impossible for young European artists today; obstacles, most of them, are of material nature. This is why, in 2000, the IETM network launched on –the-move: the performing arts traveller kit (www.on-the-move.org), after five years since the idea was born. And the idea was to create an on-line instrument and help facilitate movement of artists in Europe, by providing information, partner search and cultural cooperation search services. Immediately after the launch, I was given the difficult task to present the site and its possibilities to four groups of cultural operators in different European regions.

The first group was French. French proved a problem to read English; they also, despite a will to engage cultural cooperation projects, seemed in a way over informed and thinking along the structural functioning of the heavy institutions they know about in France. Also, most of the cultural operators in the group spoke about mobility as a means to reinforce a sense of national superiority and satisfaction as to the privileges the French cultural system allows, as compared to others.

Second group was broadly from Eastern European countries. People were multi-skilled and multilingual, they complained about the total lack of resource on behalf of mobility in each of their countries and were convinced that they could not unfortunately produce any changes. For them, mobility was also the means to strengthen a sense of 'other countries being better off'; inferiority was their key word.

In the end, On - the - move was generally appreciated as a good, necessary tool in both cases, because it was neutral and information rich, because it offered the specialised type of hints (from travel practical info to Council of Europe list of conventions info) and potentially represented a virtual territory where all young and old European cultural operators and artists can belong to. No sense of inferiority or superiority involved.

This experience show on one hand the difference between physical and virtual mobility; the former can engender alienating effects(which have nothing to do with being an alien), like the sense of being better and stronger, dominating and capable of teaching lessons or vice versa, weak and ill equipped...etc; the latter can tame and smoothen differences, but also needs specific ability and 'technological trust' from a traditionally educated cultural mediator or artist.

Also, former experience shows that there are important cultural barriers in appropriating a virtual tool written in one language only and conceptually constructed as such (in between 2002 and now, OTM already addressed these issues successfully, by diversifying as much as possible, having a regular bulletin issue, exchanging on a regular basis with users...).

Today, a tool like 'on the move' should mostly be looked at as a real laboratory for mobility practices in the artistic(cultural) field, as a background spring for our own definitions and appropriations of the notion. And of course, also as a very practical instrument to help us see how and where we can find resource and possibility to keep on moving.

To wrap all this up and come back to the networking experience and the mobility of emergent artists issue, we, each of us, have a personal reason to 'go mobile'. My personal reason is much rooted in my totalitarian past. I am happy to have lived through totalitarian Romania because now I can enjoy every minute of being allowed to become a free traveller and thus, go on learning to become a free individual .But most of all, what I enjoy about mobility is what I also enjoy about networking: the inspiration it brings!

And arts need inspiration and young artists are inspiration. They have to be given the opportunity to move (physically and virtually) around, as much as possible.

I end here, wishing all of you to keep on networking and be mobile, so that you can keep being inspired!

This would be my definition of what politicians love to call better world".