

## **Impressions from the conference: The Barcelona Experience**

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Fireworks shot from the roof, from the bodies of devils. A masked woman on a cart gyrated around a tripod. Rock music was accompanied by jugglers oozing flame. Smoke permeated the crevices of the newly polished glass and the clothes of the serious-minded pedagogues and curious bystanders alike. ELIA had arrived in Barcelona, its sober discussions launched by The Commediants flaming show, a combination of mediaeval trope, street circus and heavy metal. The one glass of warm cava on offer afterwards seemed a tame libation in comparison. People drifted back towards the centre of town in search of something stronger or to prepare for the intellectual rigours of the days ahead.

Quite how rigorous the tone was to be became clear in the opening two sessions. They could hardly have been more contrasted, one all about the most utilitarian of issues for arts schools - employability - the other tackling the theme, which immediately involves itself in politics, aesthetics, morality and social conscience - the commitment of the artist. The French-minded delegates would hardly have been surprised to find three British and one Irish delegate populating the employability panel. Surely the perfect illustration of the mechanics versus the visionaries? I would put it another way, though. In the French system employment in the arts is still a concept worth considering. In Britain, the culture of short contract has reached such a pitch that we can only gaze at the prospect of stable artistic employment with tear-filled eyes, wondering forlornly what we will all be doing to earn a living in twelve months time. Our employability is tested with nerve-crunching regularity.

Over in the commitment room Clémentine Deliss was painting a gloomy picture. 20% of arts students in their twenties have no concept of subversion any more. The best they can manage is a bit of wry humour or environmental concern. A further 60% think of subversion as single issue politics - women's issues (there don't seem to be many men around in the arts these days), perhaps, or the ethics of food production. It was suggested that the question posed to art students should be commitment to whom, rather than what? The eclecticism of contemporary life makes it increasingly difficult to find a common style. This was amplified nicely in the idea that 'one cannot declare oneself in only one register. We need polygonal ways of thinking.' Personally I find straight and lateral thinking quite hard enough. 'To say I like a piece of work is far too dangerous,' someone complained, 'young people are not looking at the work anymore. They are gossiping instead to build a consensus, a global membership strategy.' Critical judgement has become outdated, it seems, in an age in which nobody knows what standards to apply.

Robert Fleck was more optimistic, drawing a line under the last century. 'In the 90s the mark of commitment was the social responsibility of the artist,' he said. 'There was a demand for equality and political correctness. Emancipation was re-emerging as a driving force.' Those brought up as the politically correct generation are now ready to enter the arts schools as teachers. But now the commitment is more neutral. Artists are not committing themselves to any political movement unless, possibly, it is opposition to globalisation. Within the artistic context, artists work for small social changes. Fleck cast the period since 1975 as one of pragmatism and feels that we may now be coming to the end of it, ready for the re-emergence of a more idealistic aesthetic.

Later on during that first morning participants tackled that issue closest to their hearts - new developments in Arts Education. There was a lament for the hallowed idea that the process should primarily rest on good artists passing on their vision and skills. Instead the cult of the diploma was taking over, as arts institutions tried to prove to governments that their pieces of paper were as rigorously examined as any from engineering or the sciences. Training for academic competence was taking over from leading out the talent of the individual.

This is hardly a new complaint, of course. It was one side of the argument that raged in the academies of Italy in the late sixteenth century. It is also perhaps inevitable when there are so many arts schools in Europe, producing far more graduates than can ever achieve real greatness in their art. Most will be lucky to fashion out a reliable profession. Nonetheless it was depressing to hear about the extreme bureaucratisation creeping across the continent and particularly invasive in France, with its array of qualifications required to teach the arts, its Ministry of Culture protocols, statutes, legal bases, analyses, evaluations and inspectorates. Quite enough to bring my anarchist side screaming to the front, crying 'scrap the whole thing!' The French line seems to be that arts schools have much the same role as those, which teach journalism and economics. Either this means that the latter pair of professions have a far loftier calling than I had thought, or that the arts are seen as inexact but utilitarian. Neither conclusion fits reality - or at least I hope it doesn't.

There is an element of truth in the utilitarian view, however, as we were reminded by Marieke Sanders-ten-Holte, the Dutch Liberal member of the European Parliament's Culture Committee. Marieke kindly suggested that ELIA deserved proper recognition in the EU's budget, a suggestion that had the secretariat reaching for its calculator immediately and wondering if there was really any way into the agriculture lines. She pointed out that 'education is big business now' and that in political circles information technology is the only truly fashionable subject. For the EU, she was of the opinion that 'there must be mobility for students as well as goods'. Given that the

business of education is so engaging I wondered whether this relegated students to the status of tomatoes, shipped around the EU but likely to lose their freshness along the way. Perhaps they are beef instead, in which case I look forward to the next decent riot over the environment being described as an 'outbreak of mad student disease'.

Over in the theatre of the converted flower market Marieke Sanders-ten-Holte was on the platform once again, giving much the same presentation as she had in the morning. This time the subject was the vexed one of European funding. 'We are good at starting things,' said Marieke, meaning by 'we', the European institutions, 'but we never give enough thought to how they should continue.' How true! As anybody will tell you who has had to explain gently to the European Commission that an organization's need for funding doesn't stop after three years. There is still a totally unfounded belief in the fiction that cultural organisations will one day be self-sufficient. But they are not commercial businesses (even though they may have some of the trappings). Normally they have precious few assets or services to sell. Self-sufficiency is neither the point nor in their nature.

A little later in the same space Ion Caramitru, then Romania's culture minister, gave one of his now almost traditional inspiring speeches, reading from his memoirs, rather than confronting delegates with the usual ministerial report. In many ways it was a valediction, a summing-up of how a great actor had ended up in the government of the most impoverished of Europe's post-war victim countries. With the re-election of the regime of President Ilescu, Ion finds himself as an actor once again but at the time of the Barcelona conference he was still in office. In the days of dictatorship, he explained, you couldn't state opposition openly, nor give the secret police the excuse of using your actions against you. It did not prevent understanding, though. 'Our favourite space to move was the space between the words.' Perhaps it is a space, which slack journalism and superficial interpretation now closes more effectively than repression.

Eduard Delgado, a motive force in Barcelona's revival over the last twenty years, expanded on the theme, drawing it towards a justification for the arts that moves beyond mechanical concerns. 'We must no longer be prepared to accept explanations based on economics, social engineering and diplomacy.

Only on human rights.' And, bringing it back to the business of educating people in artistic disciplines, he declared that, 'students are entitled to have a go at their trade.' The aim must be to achieve a state of cultural security - security in the narrow sense of artistic practitioners being able to work with encouragement and without hindrance; but in the wider sense of people relying on culture for the knowledge that they have a respected place in society. Freedom of expression is not enough, Delgado argued. 'People are entitled to a response. If nobody is listening there is no point in making the expression. This is particularly grotesque in an age of inter-connectedness.' If we really want social cohesion, he suggested, we have to base our culture and its support mechanisms on the ideas of hospitality and reciprocity. 'Co-operation is neither trade nor exchange and it means nothing if it is not undertaken on the basis of equity.'

Delgado's lucid and determined presentation was, for me, the intellectual high point of the conference. When we returned to the practice of the arts, the moments of revelation were rather more haphazard. I was shocked (but perhaps should not have been) at the sheepish laughter that greeted the remark in the visual arts session that, 'a large number of students this year want to learn painting'. To the assembled art teachers this was clearly like saying that the new chic was pet dinosaurs. I saw instead the welcome chance that we have emerged from the decade of the meaningless and lazy installation.

The equal opportunities session was an almost entirely female affair and it seemed odd to be talking about glass ceilings four storeys underground encased in concrete. Actually it was not your very male correspondent making the all-female point. It was CIRCLE's Ritva Mitchell suggesting that the feminisation of the artistic professions should now be a matter of concern. In some European arts schools up to 80% of the students are women and they constitute nearly 90% of the theatre administrators in Finland. This is having two effects. In an otherwise male political system it reinforces the view of the arts as a 'soft' profession, attracting less serious money and being seen as social leisure. It is also beginning to prove a barrier to young men wanting to enter the arts. They were seen as disruptive forces; they were under increasing parental pressure to find a 'proper' job, and it is becoming difficult for them to get low-level jobs in arts administration and to gain the experience they needed to progress. This was true even twenty-five years ago when I was trying to break into the lower rungs of theatre and publishing. Young men were seen as expensive, less docile and less inclined to put up with unrewarding work. A good thing too: but it clearly is an issue that needs some serious thought if the arts are not to become a one-gender profession again in the 21 century (as they were in the 19th, though the other way round).

ELIA's formal sessions ended with a virtuoso piece of crowd-pleasing. Bernice Reagan can only really be described as a singing activist and her appeal ranged from the passion of spirituals to a call to keep the radical flame alight. It was apparent she was not entirely aware that Catalunya is not yet a province of the United States by her frequent allusions to 'this country', meaning America, and the audience went away divided between those for whom she was an inspiration and those who found the certainty of her personal vocation irritatingly arrogant. The last word should go to her, though, quoted by Carla Delfos as saying having said to Peter Sellars, 'if you are waiting for a leader then you are not hearing the sound of your own voice.'

There was real inspiration immediately afterwards, however, in the new theatre of the Institute, where its students gave a dance performance of the highest possible standard. It was clear these performers will be able to graduate seamlessly into the finest contemporary dance ensembles anywhere in Europe. They had energy and freshness, of course, but supreme elegance, grace and cohesion as well. They reminded me of why I am in the arts and why, whatever the political context and the frustrations, there will always be no higher honour than to be associated with people whose mastery of their medium is complete and seemingly effortless.