

WHAT MAKES US TICK

Dear colleagues, dear friends

What to say after 26 happy ELIA years...

I would like to start with a quote from Michael Cunningham from his book *The Hours*

"We live our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep. It's as simple and ordinary as that.

There's just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined, but everyone knows these hours will inevitably be followed by others, far darker and more difficult. Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more. Heaven only knows why we love it so..." end quote

Heaven only knows why we love it so...

What makes us tick...

Once upon a time there was a girl, living her safe little life in a provincial town, she played in the streets, bullied her baby sister, she loved the stories her father was telling her at bedtime, she was happy.....but sometimes at night she was afraid that the big bomb would fall.....and then she would cry herself to sleep.....

Human beings have incredible potential, they develop artificial intelligence that can save lives, they can create miracles. But humans also create weapons of mass destruction, or computers and robots that take away the need of human labour, people can make people redundant, where does that lead us. We live in unsettling times, we don't know what is in store for us.

Europe is questioned, populism, the gap between rich and poor, melting ice, Brexit, Trump and many enraged, angry, disappointed people. A lot of speakers referred to this feeling of anxiety in the conference, are we indeed dancing on the volcano? We don't know, but we are worried, very worried.

Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more. Heaven only knows why we love it so..."

Samuel Becket wrote: The end is in the beginning and yet you go on....

Yes, we go on.

If you fight you can lose, if you don't fight, you have already lost.

So let's fight.....wir schaffen dass....yes we can....

But fight for what..??..

I see myself as privileged. How about you? Gathered here in Florence, I guess, we all consider ourselves privileged. To be here in this beautiful city, to enjoy the impressive heritage that our forefathers and mothers left us. Privileged we can enjoy each other's company, and what a very diverse company it is. We come from many different backgrounds, 31 countries are represented in this hall, 31, from Mongolia to Ireland, from New Zealand to Spain, enormous cultural differences. But we do have one thing in common, we are all involved in educating the artists of tomorrow. That is what connects us, like family, we recognise each other.

I read somewhere that an American lady travelling to Paris in 1913, war was on the doorstep, asked a writer what he thought art was for. He replied: "Ask me what a rose bush is for."

She was asking a key question; what is art for?

Everybody considers it as normal that tax payers, pay for our hospitals, schools, roads etc, but for the arts, it is not so evident.

Who needs art?

Policy makers nowadays seem obsessed with economic value. The world, the industry, including the art world, has become a kind of money-driven media circus; dependent on marketing, management and spin, which makes you cynical about the product. The product..!?.

Art is being treated as a commodity. Dead artists belong to the heritage industry, as we can witness in this city. Living artists belong to the PR industry.

But..... if money ceased to exist, I am sure art would continue.

If war flattened Florence tomorrow, someone would start to make an installation out of the rubble.

Our girl was living her little life, played the piano, she was very polite to people, learned ice skating, made lots of friends, loved her cat to pieces and went to school. She was dreaming of travelling, but her parents did not have the money, so during holidays they stayed in her flat country, but that didn't matter. She was staring at the horizon, trying to imagine the mountains she wanted to climb. Her rich school friends came back from their ski-holidays, with their brown heads and white 'rest of the body", it made her laugh, because in her head she had travelled much further than any of them, to undiscovered tribes, speaking languages nobody understood and she discovered reading.....

When you take time to read a book or listen to music or look at a painting, the first thing you are doing is turning your attention inwards. The outside world, with all of its demands, has to wait. The story begins to live, becomes part of your story, part of you. There are no shortcuts, no crash courses, no fast tracks. There is only experience. Art can't change your life. Art can't change the world, but... it might inspire someone who can... What art can do is touch you, touch your soul, your imagination. It can touch a specific unknown desire deep down, a truth about yourself, somewhere hidden and ignored because you are busy with the 24-hour emergency zone called real life.

Art can bring us back to consciousness, sometimes quietly, sometimes dramatically, but it is yours and yours only.

What is art for?

We are not very good in answering that question, are we?

Work to be done!

Around two thousand five hundred years ago Confucius said:

'Tell me, and I will forget.

Show me, and I may remember.

Involve me, and I will understand.'

One day, one afternoon, the artist came to her school. The artist, a dancer, cigarette in her mouth, straight, strong, a bit scary....The artist asked the girl to transform herself into a tree...

What a stupid question! That is impossible! I cannot be a tree, she is crazy, I cannot do that.....

But she did.

The girl transformed.

She became a tree.

The artist taught her to hear like a tree, to see like a tree, to feel like a tree. A whole new dimension of hearing, seeing and feeling, a whole new dimension of living was revealed to her.

The artist had no idea of the enormous impact she had at that moment on the little girl, she just lit another cigarette and moved on to the next exercise she had prepared for the children.....

Albert Einstein said 'Logic brings us from A to B, but imagination brings us everywhere'.

What makes us tick?

Why do we do what we do?

Why did I start ELIA?

Two reasons:

Of course I do know we need water, bread and a roof over our head, essential, but after that, for me, art is a necessity, without art I would not want to live. For me the importance of art in our lives always has been so very obvious, that I was flabbergasted and shocked when I found out that for most policy and decision makers, this is not the case, on the contrary. So, I wanted to create arguments for a better understanding of the importance and value of the arts.

To advocate the arts, that was number one

When I lived in New York, beginning of the 80'ties, I realised, from this distance, how fragile Europe was if it would stay divided. In those years the European Union existed of 9 countries only.

I strongly believe in a united Europe, and oh yes, I do know Europe is complicated and painfully bureaucratic, I know all about that, but in my mind no price is too high for peace, stability and freedom of movement. Europe was the second.

And in founding ELIA I could combine those two, advocating the arts and Europe, my raison d'etre.

When ELIA was founded, the iron curtain was still dividing Europe and the first day of the founding conference, 3 October 1990, Germany was united.

I know there are at least 20 people here in the audience who were present during ELIA's founding conference in Amsterdam in 1990, it seems like yesterday.

But I am afraid that there will also be people in the audience that were not even born in 1990, so what can I say...different times, so much has changed, but those two reasons that make me tick, they never changed until the day of today.

Imagination brings us everywhere....

The title of the founding conference of ELIA in 1990 was: 'Imagination and Diversity, Europe's richness.....

And look at us now, 26 years later...

I consider myself privileged to have had the opportunity to develop ELIA, to work closely with many of you, sometimes facing big misunderstandings, encountering unexpected viewpoints, often a lot of laughter, admiration and friendships and almost always a rewarding result. And lots of unforgettable dinners, I can say 'cheers' in many languages. I learned about true international cooperation, I learned from all of you.

I am proud if I see the ELIA Board discussing, 19 different languages around the table, everybody fully engaged in the topic, and although English is often the 2nd or 3rd language, everybody understands each other, everybody speaks, so to say, the same 'language'.

When I was preparing for today, I asked myself, what is the most important thing I would like to tell you and many themes crossed my mind, the ELIA themes, so much to say about them:

Bridging the gap between art schools and the real world; the changing role of the artist; ranking systems, but my thoughts always came back to that single question.....what makes us tick...

How about you, here, all together in the Villa Vittoria in Florence, what makes you tick?
Why do you do what you do?

You are educating the artists of tomorrow. A major task and responsibility, lying on your shoulders. I would like to ask you, if you are once more snowed under by administrative paperwork because of financial threats, accreditation challenges or other demands from outside, I would like to ask you to see to it, that the artists of tomorrow will get all there is to offer and more, please listen to them, look at them, give them space, give them what they need.

In the end our work is all about them. I have seen many of the artists you have educated. ELIA has showcased over 500 emerging artists in the NEU NOW festival up to now, young talented artists coming from your institutions, some of them now leading artists. To name a few:

Theater: Jak Sorota , Dance: Zapia Company, Design: Stine Aas, film: Sophie Dros, Visual art: Vladimir Novak, music: Olivier Duverger...

Olivier has been sitting in the audience stands up and answers with the saxophone

Next October you will have another Executive Director and ELIA will continue to bring you together with your peers. ELIA will continue with sharing, creating, facilitating, cooperating, generating discussion and advocating the arts.

I will also continue, not as your Executive Director, but in whatever capacity that will cross my path.

You will continue with educating the artist of tomorrow, please see to it that they get all there is to offer, that they get what they need.

Olivier on stage, improvises, Carla sits down and watches Olivier

Olivier gives a short concert of Giacinto Scelsi - Tre Pezzi movement 3 and

Zourna - Zad Moulataka 1st movement with images of NEU NOW works projected

Carla disappears