Festivals, Inequality, and International Collaboration

18 June 2021

Panel Remarks by Diane Ragsdale

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Greetings from the Netherlands and thank you, Inge, for the invitation to be here. I was able to join the opening plenary session and was incredibly inspired by the speakers and moved by the conversation. It is a privilege to be able to share a few thoughts and hear from others today. My sincere thanks to my fellow panelists, as well.

This session - *Festivals, Inequality and International Collaboration* –seems to be aimed at getting at quite a few of today's pressing social, logistical, environmental, political, and technological challenges. Each of the questions we, as panelists, were given to consider as we developed our presentations could be the basis for a year-long working group. The questions we are sitting with these days and the complexities of their interrelationship are awesome in all senses of that word: they produce, in me anyway, feelings of reverence, overwhelm, admiration, and fear.

In nearly every arts convening one attends these days there seems to be an understanding that, as we go forward, we must do so in a more socially and environmentally conscious way. That it will be insufficient simply to survive the past year. That we need to come out better.

I have been working lately with a group called The International Presenting Commons. The IPC is an emergent, evolving, volunteer group of US–based performing arts presenters and creative independent producers who have joined forces to keep international cultural exchange and engagement alive and vibrant now and into the future. Its goals and values map directly onto the topics being discussed this week.

Festivals for a New Age: Models of Responsiveness, Flexibility and Resistance
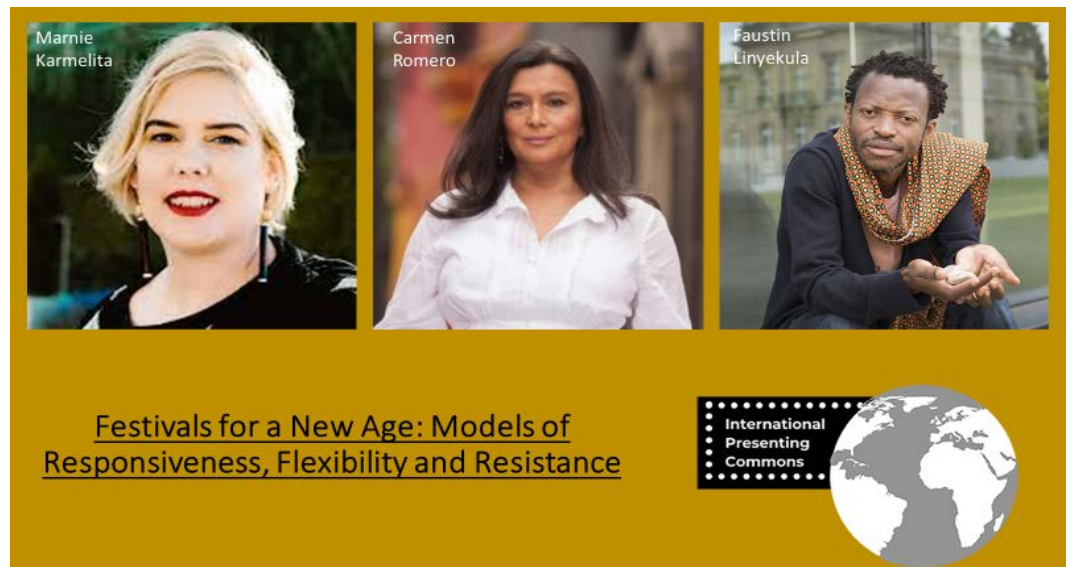
Just last week we produced an event in which we talked with Carmen Romero (in Chile), Faustin Linyekula from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Marnie Karmelita, in New Zealand.

Their conversations surfaced several themes:

- Decentering the US, as well as NY and LA,
- Interdependence,
- Making enduring commitments,
- Borders – imagined and real,
- Equitable exchange,
- Flexibility and fluidity,
- Humility and responsibility,
- Coming together to imagine, improvise, and solve problems,
- Expanding curatorial voices,
- New collaborations and investments in local artists,
- Deeper engagements with place, including with local indigenous communities
- The relationship between art and government, or politics, and
- What it means, and what it takes, to foster a democratic culture.

I would say that these three individuals are also expanding and evolving the concept of *festival* to address the needs of artists and their communities today.

The questions posed to this panel were to a great extent *How* questions:

- How to address inequalities with regard to travel and carbon emissions?
- How to address data and digital access divides in online festivals?
- How to deal with accessibility and inclusion in physical, digital, and hybrid formats?
- How questions always make me think of shifts that need to be made at the level of organizing principles.

So as I am no longer in the trenches at a festival and able to give you tactical advice on some of these how's … I thought I would focus on such principles at four levels: community relationships, board / governance policies, org / staffing structure, and self or praxis.

POSSIBLE SITES OF TRANSFORMATION?

SELF
STAFF
BOARD
COMMUNITY
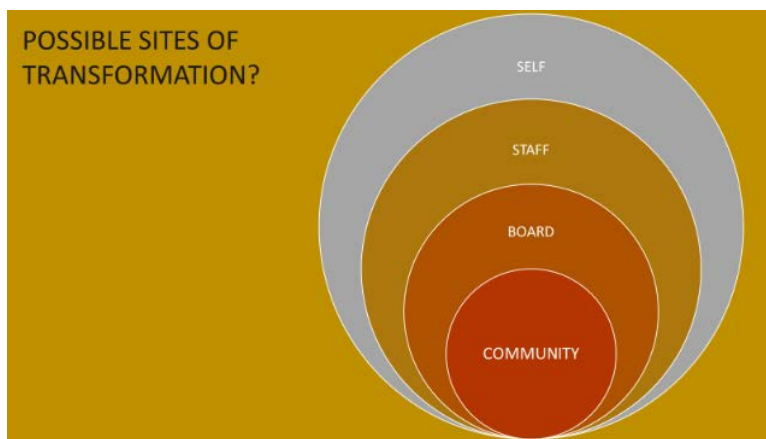
#1. COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS: For 22 weeks last fall and winter I co-lead a workshop series called Catalyzing Engagement for a group of 10 cultural institutions in California. The premise of this initiative was that in a year when the core of many institutions – putting on live performances - had been hollowed out that now was the perfect time to put engagement at the core, by which we meant a focus on internal and external relationships and to deep listening within and without. The goal was to foster transformation by allowing these relationships and a focus on how we work to take precedence over products, or what we make.

Moments of disruption are a great time to unlearn dominant logics (that is, beliefs, values, goals, processes, principles, and practices).

When Covid hit, in many arts and cultural institutions gathered a small group of individuals in a room to determine what would be best for everyone. This is how change is often executive. Many also gave the production of online content in particular primacy over relationships to artists and care for communities.

What shifts if we put deep listening and relationship building (the principles of engagement) at the core of the institution?

BOARD / GOVERNANCE POLICIES

What's holding your feet to the fire as aesthetic & ethical values shift?

#2. GOVERNANCE / POLICIES I spend a lot of time thinking about the mutually interdependent relationship between economics, aesthetics, and ethics. And one of the concerns I have is that economic values have been crowding out or stretching aesthetic and ethical values. At a sector level this is quite often because success by funders and others tends to be equated with economic growth; this trickles down to the organizational level where economics tends to considerable attention from the governing board.

Most boards have finance and audit committees who debate and discuss the budget, establish targets, and implement policies to ensure the organization is sound financially both in the present and in the future.

On the other hand, how many cultural nonprofits have depth conversations at the board level to come to agreement on what is meant by artistic excellence and how that may be shifting? Or what it means to advance social or climate justice goals as a cultural institution?

Many arts organizations establish such values but give inadequate time for deliberation, debate, and policy setting aimed at interpreting … prioritizing … and figuring out what it is going to take to fully realize such values in practice.

#3 ORGANIZATIONS / STRUCTURE I was interviewed for a podcast a couple of months ago and one of the questions I was asked is what kind of leadership is needed in this moment.

I have alluded to one kind of leadership already—relational leadership—which is focused on inclusion and ethical behaviors, on process over product, and on imagining the future of relationships and allowing that imagined future to inform present actions.

AGILE MINDSET

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

ORG DECISION MAKING STRUCTURES

The other two leadership approaches I believe are needed at the moment are an agile mindset and distributed or participatory leadership. Having an agile mindset requires being structured to create and respond in uncertain environments, adapting as you go along. An agile mindset tends to rely (among others) on small teams and forming networks for collaboration. And distributed or participatory leadership is about sharing power and shifting away from the notion of a singular leader and a top-down mode of decision making.

Finally, #4 at the level of SELF I have been fleshing out ideas lately for what I'm calling a community of inquiry, practice & care. Because, the truth is, we cannot do this work alone.

INQUIRY: A space to consider collectively the problems and opportunities facing the sector and collectively imagine possible pathways into the future;

PRACTICE: A space to learn together what it means and what it takes, from a practical standpoint, to respond to this moment and be a culture change agent;

CARE: A space to provide mutual support and encouragement; a space grounded in love & wellbeing.

I was inspired along this line of thinking by the writing of Michael Jones, who wrote the book *Artful Leadership*, this passage in particular:

To cross the threshold into the era ahead we will all need to create opportunities for these new kinds of informal, peer-to-peer generative learning spaces – where new higher-level learning comes to us through the shared processes of exploring, inquiring, and imagining together.

Moreover, arising out of such communities, I believe we need laboratories in which to incubate and experiment, undertake collective research, share our successes and failures, and form movements to shift the systems in which we are embedded.

Form Communities of Inquiry, Practice & Care

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Michael Jones, Artful Leadership

SELF (PRAXIS)

So to summarize: **How do we realize the better future to which we aspire?**

1. Put relationships to the communities for whom you exist to create value (rather than products) at the core of your institution.

2. Make sure your board is paying attention to more than the bottom line; engage in debate and discussion and create policies & principles that will hold your feet to the fire in terms of shifting aesthetic and ethical values.

3. A system is resilient in relationship to how decentralized it is. Shift and share power; work in small, agile teams; and create networks.

4. Create / join communities of practice, inquiry and care where you can come together to ask questions, identify problems, imagine solutions, share successes and failures, and support one another.

Thank you for your kind attention.