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Getting out of the Comfort Zone

According to a 2015 study¹, around one half of 352 surveyed arts managers from 46 countries consider their work to be international, and it can be assumed that this number will increase in the following years. It is important to emphasise that this survey deliberately did not target arts managers who are considered experts in international contexts (such as, for instance, employees of cultural institutes or large foundations). Considering this, arts management educators in particular have to ask themselves the question of how to successfully prepare their students for the internationalisation of the role.

Eurocentrism:

The aforementioned study evidenced a Eurocentrism which is manifested through the fact that European arts managers, particularly those from German-speaking regions, still rarely work in contexts which differ in regards to their own understanding of arts and culture. The majority of collaborative projects from European arts managers take place in (Western) Europe, predominantly still within their immediate geographical neighbourhood. There are certainly pragmatic reasons for this, such as for example relatively few visa issues, no long travel times, currency fluctuations or different time zones. In addition to this, the existing 'Creative Europe' funding makes collaborating with partners outside of Europe more difficult due to requirements tailored specifically to Europe. This pragmatism in regards to choosing partners, which barely challenges the own concept of culture, inhibits important knowledge gain.

The topic of audience development for instance, discussed for many years and with moderate success in Germany, is in this form not really an issue for colleagues in Africa. For decades now, daily business has rather included the addressing of the inhomogeneous population of many African countries, whose borders were drawn up without any regard to native tribes and languages. Unfortunately, we still have not yet adequately recognised the potential of colleagues' competences and experiences.

Many arts managers from countries of the 'Global South' justifiably criticise their substantial marginalisation.² One arts manager from Lebanon points out that her home country hosts many more refugees than most European countries do, and that a welcoming culture had been established years ago, which still functions well today³. It is surprising that this expertise is barely drawn upon by European colleagues. It is also revealing to look at South America, where arts management has historically seen a much stronger humanistic structure, in comparison to North America, which was and still is the force behind numerous arts management achievements in Europe. South America focuses more on social issues. There, it has always been the task of arts and culture and the people involved with it to explore creative processes which should (and can!) contribute to tackling social challenges; such as violence in Colombia and Guatemala, corruption in Argentina and Peru, ethnic diversity in Chile and Mexico, inequality in Brazil.⁴ In Europe, and in particular in Germany, we have only slowly begun to explore forms of community engagement, social arts or collaborative arts projects. This is of

¹ Henze, 2016, p. 81. From the arts managers from non-German-speaking countries the number is even higher at 60%.

² Henze, 2016, p. 97 ff.

³ Fakhoury, 2016, p. 27.

⁴ Hernandez-Acosta, 2013, p. 134.

course also because political circumstances and times of increasing populism force us to.⁵ We do not need to reinvent the wheel; we only need to get out of our comfort zone, so that we can learn. Therefore, there is much to be said for offering students such learning opportunities early on during their studies. This can be done through adequately prepared and evaluated field trips and joint projects with (practice) partners abroad. Or also through the involvement and engagement in international networks, such as for instance 'Brokering Intercultural Exchange', which will continue to increase in relevance.⁶

Relevance for Society as a Whole

The comfort zone is no one-way street; it reaches far beyond geographical borders. Internationalisation does not only take place on 'the outside', but within our organisations also. Many of the contexts described as international by the arts managers are perhaps more accurately reflected using the term transcultural, as they do not describe encounters that take place abroad or include foreign elements, but describe those that take place within their respective organisation. Even though it is unfortunately still difficult for us as a relatively homogeneous cultural sector⁷, we will not be able to avoid exploring the increasingly inhomogeneous societies in all its facets in a serious and sustainable way, if we want to regain relevance and survive in the long-term. This exploration will go as far as to question the 'products' for which we, sometimes more and sometimes less successfully, sought 'customers' over the years. We will have to look for new formats that involve people in the artistic process and the design of the product. What is presented here in a simplified form is nothing but a paradigm shift, which is accompanied by the loss of privileges and, if necessary, interpretative prerogative. But some are regrettably and, as numerous projects from Germany and abroad prove⁸, unnecessarily concerned about quality. This is another comfort zone in which we, as the cultural sector, have comfortably and partially also arrogantly established ourselves in. This comfort zone has to be abandoned soon, if we finally want to take the overall societal relevance seriously. This does not only impact education, but also the self-conception of the discipline. Guardians become grave-diggers.

We have to prepare students for this too. It is no longer enough to march off with a toolbox, having the right instruments ready to use on any problems that might arise during the working process. Arts managers are part of the creative processes and will engage as many people as possible in exactly these processes. Mediating, moderating and motivating are becoming increasingly important, but certainly not easy tasks.

Creativity is considered one of the most important competencies for a successful career in arts management by the arts managers who participated in the above mentioned study. Interdisciplinary thinking is considered an essential part of every creative process. The inclusion of contents from (development) geography, history, ethnology or post colonial studies is just as important as foreign language skills, intercultural competence and media literacy.

⁵ Henze, 2017.

⁶ Cvjeticanin, 2011.

⁷ A study completed by the consultancy firm Ithaka S + R for the Cultural Affairs Department in New York (R. C. Schonfeld/L. Sweeny (2016)) found that in a city, in which white people only make up one third of the population, they still make up 61.8 % of so-called cultural workers. The city of New York now plans a pilot project, enabling 85 non-white students to access 35 cultural institutions where they might even find employment in the future. Terkessides and Carty also describe the difficulty of how a homogeneous group of people is meant to suddenly generate diversity. The current study by Vincent DuBois (2016) demonstrates that jobs in the creative sector are predominantly occupied by people who have experienced socialisation with arts and culture in early childhood, for instance through museum and theatre visits or music or dance lessons.

⁸ Henze, 2017.

Student Mobility:

Another important aspect which has been missing from the discussion on the internationalisation of education, is the increasing mobility of students from transition economies. Their growing and certainly solvent elites are hoping for the first-class education for their offspring particularly in the USA (which is made more difficult due to increasingly strict visa requirements) and in Europe. The internationalisation of the higher education sector has proven to be quite a lucrative business for the UK in particular. It is therefore the arts management approaches from these countries that make their way into the world, but might not necessarily fit in all contexts.⁹ Intercultural transfer skills therefore have to be studied not only by students, but by many educators also. It is too often that we still find Western 'experts' deciding to go and lecture in other parts of the world on issues that might not be relevant there, or might have to fundamentally be approached in a different way due to numerous historical or social reasons.¹⁰ Listening and learning would be more appropriate.

Slowly but steadily the student body is diversifying¹¹. The too rarely posed but essential question will be how we can successfully utilise this diversity and its inherent potential for education. Here too, educators are taken outside of their comfort zone. Diversity does not only mean an increase in different ethnicities and cultural or religious backgrounds in the lecture hall. It also means an increase in students who might no longer belong to the educated middle-class of the professor-generation, but have gained different skills relevant to later professional life. In the best case, this could in addition to the important media literacy, include a more relaxed attitude to the topic of diversity that is likely to be more natural for this generation, than for those who are teaching them.

The comfort zone is individual, depending on individual preferences, experiences and the own socialisation. The only thing certain is that every single person has to leave it in some shape or form. This is unavoidable and sounds threatening, but brings with it numerous opportunities. If we are able to prepare students for their leaving of this comfort zone, we are probably doing them the best service not only for their career in arts management, but beyond that as well.

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⁹ Henze, 2016, p. 32.

¹⁰ For more on collaborations and how these can be designed to be mutually beneficial see A. Hampel, 2014 and 2016.

¹¹ Opportunities to access university education for children from the so-called uneducated classes remain significantly lower than for children from academic households. Even though Germany prides itself on the accessibility of its education system (and in comparison with the UK and France, this might really be the case), it is still far from equal educational opportunities in relation to its educational policy decisions and potentially also financial means. But homogeneity can also be observed from the side of the teaching staff and the power centres of cultural institutions. Not even every fourth professor is female. Professors in Germany are on average over 50 years old. International professors or ones with migration backgrounds are still few and far between. Once again, how is this homogeneity meant to support or even generate diversity?

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