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EVERYDAY CREATORS: FRIENDS OR FOES?

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Everyday creators: friends or foes?

In these panel discussion and interactive open forum, participants explored ways and reasons to awaken more people to the arts and empower potential artists by supporting everyday creativity.

Stella Duffy, creator of Fun Palaces, stepped in as an ardent advocate for true diversity in the arts sector: “Fun Palaces believes (and has seen in practice) that everyone can and should have access to the arts not just as audiences but also as creators. We believe that culture is a great catalyst for community - especially when everyone is welcome to create.”

Anupama Sekhar from ASEF presented the current situation of the professional and amateur art scene in Singapore, India and the Philippines. Although artistic careers are often perceived a precarious path, funding of professional art in Southeast Asia is on steady growth in recent years. As amateur arts are also on the rise, new schemes are developed to support everyday creativity too.

In the following discussion, moderated by Esther Charron, Poles Magnetiques, Art et Culture, many voices reinforced the urge to open up the art world for those who were not privileged to be part of it and to foster everyday creativity – because this will enrich the society and the arts as well.

Creativity can take so many forms

Stella Duffy, the speaker to open the session, was born in the UK in a working-class family of seven children, which then moved to New Zealand where she grew up. The place where she lived there was three hours away from a gallery, six hours away from a theatre, yet it was full of creative people.

Stella presented herself with a mihimihi, the Maori way to introduce yourself by



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Moderator:

Jo Verrent, Senior producer of Unlimited commissions programme at Artsadmin, UK

Speakers:

Stella Duffy, co-director at Fun Palaces, UK

Anupama Sekhar, director Culture Department at ASEF - Asia Europe Foundation, Singapore

naming the mountains and the rivers which are significant for the place you come from, whom your parents descend from and who you are. This poetic way of saying hello was the starting point of Stella’s convincing appeal to “value all of our creativity, in the same way we should value all people, not running our societies as if some lives are worth more than others...”

The concepts of “high art” that brought to life our main art institutions – museums, theatres, galleries – were moulded in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. Hence our art institutions are completely outdated. They are based on some esoteric

knowledge of what art is, which can be acquired at a short list of universities and schools. Their governing structures are hierarchical and rigid, not allowing much space for women, for people of colour, for disabled bodies or for the young. Even the architecture of many art buildings is unwelcoming: imposing facades with pillars and staircases, as of temples or palaces; hissing “Don’t you dare come up here, you little working-class girl”, as Stella vividly put it.

No wonder that – despite all the efforts – the arts audiences are predominantly white, middle class and middle aged. If we want

to welcome diversity in the arts, we should open our structures, our programmes, our scenes. And we should stop privileging professional artists over those who have had no access to the privilege of training or apprenticeship. As Stella said, maybe we should look at the many Indian restaurants of the UK for instance, and see if there are people – “whose role we see as feeding us” - who might want to have their culture presented on our main stages, or to present it themselves.

Is there really an opposition between ‘professional’ and ‘everyday’ artists?

Stella spoke of her experience of being a freelance artist / playwright / theatre director for over 30 years, with all the precarity that surrounds the independent artist’s life: irregular working hours, unpaid holidays, no paid sick leave despite having cancer twice... Yet Stella felt extremely privileged to have been an artist, to have the opportunity to create and to earn money from making her work. It is a privilege that very few people ever access.

And if we consider working in the arts to be a hard work, we should look at the work of any labourer to see what hard work is. As for the fears of losing jobs in the arts in case we welcome more “unprofessional” people, job losses should not worry us, because “our current system does not work” anyway - full-time, publicly funded, paid jobs in the arts exist for a very few artists, while the vast majority still live in precarity.

According to Stella, artists should be worried instead about the staggering lack of diversity in the arts because it hampers the sector altogether. “Those of us passionate about everyday creativity, about community-led culture, want to extend this privilege to more people, to those usually excluded for the multitude of intersectional reasons to do with class, poverty, race and ethnicity, gender, ability, sexuality and all the forms of ‘othering’ that treats the white, able-bodied, middle-class man - and the work he makes - as the norm.”

Fun Palaces as a celebration of everyday creativity

Stella, together with other like-minded cultural practitioners, have initiated [Fun Palaces](#) as an ongoing campaign for cultural democracy, that “promotes culture at the heart of community and community at the heart of culture”. Fun Palaces happen annually on the first weekend of October. Usually, they happen in libraries, community centres, art institutions – at any place which wants to welcome their community. A “Fun Palace” is a community-led, self-funded event that puts in focus the skills, the creativity, and the subjects that the people who run it are passionate about. And a Fun Palace can be run by anybody – supported by the core Fun Palaces organisation.

When asked by a potential funder of the initiative how they would ensure excellency (of the artistic offer), Stella replied that they would rather focus on ensuring real participation, instead of ticking some policy papers’ boxes. Over the past six years, there have been 1367 Fun Palaces made by 32 800 local people with 450 000 participants. As [Fun Palaces 2018 Evaluation](#) demonstrates, 38% of the participants lived in the most deprived areas and neighbourhoods, approximately 27% belong to an ethnic minority, 14% had some kind of a disability or a health condition, 54% of participants did not usually seek out science activities, 33% did not usually attend the arts, and 24% did not usually seek out either. Yet, they were at the Fun Palace, and 77% agreed it made them willing to get more involved in science, arts and culture locally.

So, how is it made? “We don’t fly in artists to help communities to participate. We believe people out there are skilled enough to make the Fun Palace and participate by themselves!”, Stella insisted. Fun Palaces is supported by six part-time ambassadors around the UK who facilitate local teams of Makers to organise and lead the Fun Palaces themselves. The majority of those teams of Makers included people from an ethnic minority, 44% included people with a disability. Women, LGBTQ people, the eldest and the youngest have their roles in

making a Fun Palace too (See [Fun Palaces 2018 Evaluation](#)). Empowering people to lead creatively is in the core of the Fun Palace’s mission. The other core principle is not to ask anyone – be it artists or anybody else – to work for free or “give to their community”. Instead, ask people what they are passionate about and then encourage them to create a Fun Palace around their own passions and enthusiasm. This has proved to be especially valuable to people who have never been given the chance to lead before.

“Fun Palaces have shown us that all kinds of people want to create, all ages want to create, and that if we support everyone in their own creativity and culture, we will eventually work towards a new culture - one that includes all because it is by all. A culture that might finally break free from the hegemony imposed by white, capitalist, imperial Europe and be as equal and broad-ranging as the humanity of which we are all part.” – that’s how Stella outlined the greatest outcome of letting everyday creativity in the arts.

The specifics of amateur and professional in an Asian context

Anupama Sekhar director of the Culture Department at the publicly-funded Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), based in Singapore, brought in the funder’s perspective on the topic, along with an insight of the Asian/South Asian art scene – quite different from the European one, although we might argue that some Asian institutional models are adopted from Europe.

First of all, ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ arts are defined somewhat differently in the Asian context. Albeit requiring the appropriate qualifications for the job, arts institutions in India, for instance, do not consider that they have to pay an appropriate reimbursement to art managers. As Anupama shared her experience, a symbolic salary of 50 dollars was the typical offer. Often, professional artists could hardly sustain themselves on solely their art all around the world, but in Asia that is the general case, as many

artists don't earn from their art at all. The artistic career is highly precarious, both in economic and political terms. There are many cases of artists being prosecuted for the opinions they express. All this makes arts a career path that Asian parents would hardly recommend to their children.

The funder's view on everyday creativity

ASEF's Culture Department funds mostly mobility projects through programmes like *Mobility First!* which fosters cultural interchange between Asia and Europe. In the last two years Anupama has noticed an increased share of what we could call amateur artists among the travel grants applicants. "These artists offer brilliant projects that put creativity in the centre of community life, but they cannot be defined as professionals – while our programme has the mandate to give travel grants to professional artists.", Anupama explained the difficulties ASEF as a funder has encountered with the rising share of proposals by amateur artists (about 20% of all applications for the past year). So now the board and the selection committee should rethink where the line between amateur and professional should be dropped.

There could be some funds available for arts through the public health programme, as long as arts and creativity contribute to the general well-being. The question is how to manage funding both professional arts and the increasing share of amateur art projects that put creativity in the heart of public life.

Examples from Singapore, the Philippines and India

Singapore is economically very well developed, and in the last 20 years the government authorities have put substantial efforts to turn it into a hub for the arts. Singapore can offer advanced arts infrastructure; and it welcomes art from all around the world. In the past 10 years, there has been an increasing support

for the local art scene as well. "Even in a region with a lot of issues concerning the freedom of expression and a scarce public funding for the arts, professional artists in Singapore receive a considerable support from the government agencies.", Anupama explained. Interestingly, there are programmes to support amateur arts too. There are incubation schemes available, which offer community art groups up to three-year support, consisting of training and rental subsidies, to help them become more stable and self-sustainable.

In 2012, a major survey of all arts funding policies has been carried out. It demonstrated that at least 70 events, both ticketed and unticketed, happened in Singapore each day. The large part of it were attended by the same type of audiences. Those are mostly ex-pats¹, people who are comfortable with English language, people from the well-developed urban areas that are closer to the city centre... So where was the average Singaporean whose taxes also have funded those art projects in offer? "The average Singaporean lives in public housing, not in the business centres, in the "heartlands". They would prefer to see arts in Chinese, Malay or Tamil, rather than in English. They would hardly travel one or two hours to see a show in the city centre. Possible solutions to engage these audiences would be to bring the art closer to where they live, to show them content they are interested in, in their own

language, but most of all, to invite them to create art themselves. "In the last 7-8 years, the government has been rethinking its funding schemes and creating new policies to fund projects that take everyday creativity in their heart, along with the contiguous support for the professional art scene." – that's how Anupama summarised the current art affairs in Singapore. For example, *The Silver Arts Festival* puts senior citizens on stage, in the active role of creators, not just as an audience. Art has been brought to the streets and in the neighbourhoods by numerous festivals which are easily accessible and encourage everybody to take part.

The Philippines have a strong amateur arts culture, especially in terms of music. Self-taught Philippian musicians are praised all around the world – they are very present in the hotel and bar entertainment business in many parts of the world. The music scene in the Philippines is highly commercialised and allows space for many amateur musicians to earn from their art. There is also the TV and movie industry, a big entertainment industry that embraces amateur artists. The rise of reality TV shows has opened new channels to promote amateur musical talent.

Then, there is a strong neighbourhood festival scene, which exists in a completely deregulated environment. Festivals are privately or community funded, there



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¹ Singapore has a population of around 5.5 mln people, of which 30-40% are permanent residents or foreigners.

are no foster policies to support them. Community art groups, school bands and orchestra, church choirs, dance collectives – all of them are key players in the multitude of festivals that happen everywhere in the Philippines. For some of them, who really do well, the government can step in and offer support to professionalise.

The boundaries between amateur and professional art in India are blurred. Either you are an artist, or not. If we look at the current art scene of India, the majority of artists, many of the big names do not have a formal training, yet they are celebrated as professional artists, some are world famous in their art. Higher education in the arts through the university system has taken root in the last 50 years, but to date, for instance, no arts management degrees are available at university.

Typical for India is the debate on folk and classical art forms – like the separation between classical Indian dance and folk dance – and which is worth supporting or which can be deemed professional. “This was also a class divide”, Anupama added. This separation has been a subject of change since the beginning of the independent state of India (1947) and especially in recent years. Bharatnatyam, the classical dance tradition from South India, developed from a tradition of temple dancers, once relied on young girls being married off to a temple and trained in the tradition. Since it was notoriously linked to prostitution and exploitation, temple dancing has been moved to cultural houses and is currently practiced as a secular artform only.

“There has been a significant change in the perception around high and low, classical and folk-art forms in India in the last 15 years or so, with a growing recognition towards amateur arts,” Anupama explained. “Neighbourhood festival scene has added a lot to the overall recognition and visibility of the art scene, and to the democratisation of the access and participation in the arts.” Neighbourhood festivals are almost entirely privately funded, with very little public support.

Discussing aspects of everyday creativity

The discussion on everyday creativity advanced by elaborating further on some specific aspects of inclusion, participation, and empowering others to create and lead.

Art funding bodies are beginning to recognise the potential of participatory art practices and what has been deemed as ‘amateur work’. How do the well-established art institutions fit into this changing situation? Will they change their artistic practices in the future?

Stella felt that it is not fair to sustain the status-quo anymore. Having well-funded art institutions is a recent phenomenon, one of the last 100 years, probably. Art funding institutions that distribute public money to the arts date from the years after World War II (in the UK), when most of the art councils were founded. While that might seem a recent development, our societies have undergone tremendous changes over the past decades and what might be relevant to those times might be completely unfit for today’s realities. And who decided which art is worth funding? – A bunch of rich white men!, Stella argued. It was them who decided that ‘high’ theatre should be prioritised before music hall, which was popular with the vast majority of working-class people back in the 19th century. So why should we maintain what has been decided long ago and neglect other artforms that are equally valuable to certain people as opera or ballet are for their audiences². – “It might be a huge water-shed and I agree it is scary. We might throw the baby with the bath water, but I feel that it is not equitable any more to fund only art that is for white, rich, able-bodied people.”

Anupama confirmed that funding agencies all over the world are acknowledging the changing situation. The issue of unequitable distribution of funding was brought up again at the recent World summit on arts and culture in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, co-hosted by IFACCA, the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies. Should we keep considerable

shares of public art funds flowing towards well-established art institutions which, on one hand, are able to fundraise successfully anyway and on the other hand, are frequented by a narrow share of society? That is a complicated and multifaceted matter, which differs from country to country and calls for a radical rethinking of what we see as art nowadays. Surely, there will be resistance to change from established art organisations, audiences, experts, politicians. Decisions what kinds of arts to fund are policy-driven after all. Nonetheless, the funding agencies at the IFACCA conference shared the understanding that they should go beyond the “usual suspects”.

The procedures of choosing what to fund was another issue discussed by the IFACCA members. In most of the countries, a limited pool of experts in the field of arts and culture decide which projects and organisations are worth supporting. More inclusive procedures, more diverse councils, which reflect society’s structure, would most probably bring new actors in the arts and culture domain. An IFACCA member shared the experience of a survey among public audiences by an arts council in Latin America. When asked if they engaged actively with the arts, the overwhelming public response was “no”. However, the same survey also asked the public if they listened to the radio or went to the cinema regularly. The overwhelming answer was “yes”. This discrepancy highlights how the public views “the arts”: they enjoy radio and they see films, but, in their understanding, this does not constitute “engaging with the arts”. The result of this survey thus calls for arts funders to rethink perceptions and understanding of the arts in daily life by audiences.

What could theatre makers learn from participatory work (like Fun Palaces) and integrate into their practice so that they can make challenging and provocative authored works which are participatory in the same time?

Stella noted that she has done playwright / novelist work, along with the ‘amateur’ work but she has never got substantial public funding for her writing work.

² The disparity between public funding for the opera and for the other music genres has been a subject of debates: in the UK and Australia for instance.

However, getting a commission to make some art is a privilege in itself and that should come along with certain responsibilities. Let's take the case of [the National Theatre commissioning an all-male season](#), Stella suggested. OK, let those brilliant male dramaturgs and directors take the commission, but set a condition for mentoring of at least three apprentices who would not otherwise get their work into the National Theatre.

That could be a rule for any publicly funded commission of authored work to be backed by a mentoring programme of some kind. Opening the artistic process to those who don't have the same privileges - women, people of colour, disabled people, migrants, queer, poor - would bring diversity and participation into authored work - on stage, behind the stage and as a consequence, in the audience as well. "And maybe it is time for us to step back and let those who were excluded take our places. So, if you are a white woman in your 50s, you might have to step back for a Black woman to be in charge. I know how much we fought to get where we are, but now, we should step back for those who have been more excluded until now." - that is what Stella firmly believes.

Anupama reminded that art funding for artists is available in few Asian countries: Singapore, China, South Korea, Japan. Most of the artists in these countries are self-funded and over 50% need to take day time jobs to sustain themselves and their families. Some do not accept state funding due to the censorship it would impose on their work. In Asian context, the overall distinction between professional and amateur artists is rather blurred.

Anupama insisted that we have to constantly redefine our procedures to make them more inviting to diversity. The year when ASEF initiated their travel grants programme, they distributed about one hundred grants to artists who all happened to be English-speaking, based mostly in the capital cities, already travelled abroad, educated, physically and socially mobile. Working with such a small pool of artists is undoubtedly far from being inclusive, so ASEF started looking for ways to ensure a greater diversity through their

application procedures. Targeting specific regions outside the big cities indeed brought more candidates, but it raised the issue with language barriers and ASEF did not have staff to support applicants. The funding agency has considered putting a call to successful applicants to step up as volunteers in support of other artists who apply to ASEF and might have difficulties with English language or with some of the application modules. Just a few responded but according to Anupama, that is a challenge that should be overcome with consistent efforts and relevant policies developed by cultural facilitators around the world. Help and support from those who have been included to those who are not, stepping back to make place for the unprivileged ones is the path to diversity and inclusion.

Esther reminded that Arts Council Canada also revised their funding programmes because the application procedures and guidelines were not adapted to include First nation artists so the latter abstained from applying.

One of the ethical dilemmas around participatory art, especially involving vulnerable groups, is whether to pay the participants along the professional artists...

A performing artist who works with mentally challenged people in the UK brought up the issue of having paid artists working along non-paid community participants who are in fact performers in the same way as professionals are. An imbalance like that puts at risk the idea of equal participation and sharing of experiences. Even if there are enough funds to pay those people, paying them will cut their social security money and will leave them with no resources for the next month. That is the case with refugees, with people with disabilities - with anybody on welfare - and that should be addressed by funding agencies if they wish to support participatory art practices.

If a show is free of charge it is not worth reviewing or attending - that's the general assumption. How do we demonstrate that 'outreach' and participatory works are valuable despite the fact that they are most often for free?

Anupama agreed that the notion of value attached to art has a connection with the price it costs - in the general audience understanding. ASEF has the experience of offering ASEF-funded productions for free, when lots of people register and just a few turn up so they decided to begin charging fees for their offers. It is up to the artists to decide if they want their publicly funded production to be offered free of charge or not. Audience development initiatives involving subsidised tickets, especially for new and young audiences, could prove effective in the long run. In Bangalore, India, for instance, the local government funds free tickets for school students who would not otherwise visit a theatre. They have been offered three free tickets a season to performances especially created in their mother tongue. Such efforts result in having local audiences, which were different from those who would normally come to see a performance - i.e. new audiences at productions with tickets on a regular price. The hope was that children who grow up seeing performances through their school-going days, would grow up to become patrons of the art, who may pay to see performances as adults, as the arts have become part of their life.

Stella explained the specific way in which the notion of value has been attributed to Fun Palaces' activities which are always free. Self-organisation and self-agency that are in the core of Fun Palaces allow people to make whatever they are passionate about - be it board games, disco dancing, climbing or theatre. Then they invite their family, friends, neighbours to join in for the final event and naturally, what is valuable for someone close to you becomes valuable for you as well. Fun Palaces have proven to Stella once again that when people are invited to take part and enjoy the creative process, they return for the final event as well. "Being creators, we know pretty well that the creation process matters even more than the end result, so why we don't share it with the audiences that often? Why do we decide to 'do marketing' instead and pretend there hasn't been any creation process, just the end result show?" - that bewildered Stella.

How reclaiming creative space through everyday creativity is linked to reclaiming democracy, citizenship, participation in a wider sense? How could we connect creativity, humanity, and politics back again?

Anupama underlined that in parts of Asia, it has never been easy to make critical, politically engaged art. Even speaking freely on political topics can cause you problems, especially now, with the rise of right-wing governments. Recently, several artists and cultural practitioners, like the Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam, have been arrested for expressing their opinion openly. The constant shrinking of art spaces for open speech provoked as counteract the opening of more underground community centres where conversations around politics take place and the debates are growing louder. The idea of building a solidarity alliance across

SE Asia to counteract political pressure is gaining momentum. Independent media, cultural and social sectors can work together to support art activism and bridge the current divide between politics and creativity in the region.

Stella referred to Fun Palaces as a model of empowering people through creativity: "Helping people take their own control is our intrinsic vision – nothing is more political than that!". Fun Palaces open the opportunity for people to meet and have conversations, especially with those who differ from them. Through Fun Palaces, people realise that if they can come together for disco dancing or singing or whatever they are passionate about, they can come together and petition their local council on a matter of communal importance.

Stella believes: "If we in the arts continue to insist on art for art's sake, we are in big trouble because we will be confined to the currently-funded elitist (high) arts. It should be art for our sake instead. Otherwise, it doesn't have a point."

Most of the participants agreed that the art sector should denounce the idea that there is one sort of work happening on the main stages and another sort, called "outreach", which is happening somewhere else, in community centres, for instance. It is in fact the same act of creativity. As for outreach, building a work together produces a different kind of relationship, because it is not transactional but creative. By creating together, people will not only come, but even more: they will like to stay.



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