

Change is a Constant.

Festivals in “Hybrid” Times and Spaces

A comment by Nic Leonhardt, University of Cologne

A ‘virtual festival’ – that still sounds peculiar, and like a contradiction in itself. And yet, plagued by a pandemic for two entire years, we have well been accustomed to the shift of everyday and cultural life into the digital spheres. On an anthropological level, I am amazed at how quickly this trial and error has taken place. – On the one hand. On the other hand, we still see and experience daily how much the immediate exchange is missing.

The world is a different place today than it was in 2019, the year I first attended the [*Festival des Cultures du Monde in Gannat*](#), – and the last time it took place live in the region of the Auvergne in France.

In this short address,¹ I would like to reflect upon the **facets of change** that cultural life and the work of academia are undergoing. This change has been radically demonstrated by the so-called “global pandemic”. At a speed and with an intensity that we only know from wars. In my most recent book, [*Theatre Across Oceans*](#), I looked at agencies that organized transatlantic traffic between cultural practitioners and institutions. It is a study on the backstage areas of theatre understood as business at the turn of the 20th century. In the book, I did not leave out the time span during the First World War. Why? Because I was interested in what happened to the global trade of art and theatre when World War I broke out. You might well imagine what happened: The whole international theatre business collapsed. Chaos broke out. Contracts had to be broken. Tours had to be cancelled. Artists could no longer travel. Theatres had to look for alternative programmes – or were forced to close. Even if the cause is of a different

¹ This text is a slightly revised version of my keynote address for the Janapada Virtual Festival, held on 4 December, 2021.

nature, the consequences are not so dissimilar to those of the pandemic 2020-2021 and its impact on the cultural sphere.

But what does this mean for a virtual festival? Is a virtual festival only a temporary alternative? Will there soon be festivals again as we have known them so far? We find ourselves in a metamorphosis the transformation goal of which is yet unclear. This is scary, but also exciting. And challenging. We are in the middle of it, and events like the Janada festival motivate us to think about change. **To reflect on change while it is happening.**

We are all cultural practitioners in the broadest sense. Our mission and passion are to preserve, live and transmit culture. Change is also reflected in what we want to preserve. That is, our cultural assets, the tangible and intangible cultural heritage to which the performances and rituals presented at this festival belong. If change is a constant, then, positively turned, a **new orientation** is possible that does not make the tried and tested obsolete, and additionally allows for **modifications**. For example, in the form, the way, the intensity and frequency with which we do something. If change is a constant, it also means that it is something very natural, and hence something that we humans have always been able to cope with. **Change is always part of the present.**

ON SITE, VIRTUAL, HYBRID? – RE-DEFINING THE FESTIVAL

What a festival is, can only ever be grasped against the respective temporal / historical background. But if you look at the structural logic that festivals follow, the common denominator is that they

- take place in a specific place/ location or region,
- take place within a time frame of several days or weeks
- in a periodic rhythm (of 1,2,3, x years)
- create a stage for troupes and visitors from different parts of the world.

It is one of the peculiarities of a festival that the place and time of the festival produce their own quality, dynamics, intensity, and also a very unique idea and experience of space and time during the duration of the event.

At the Festival de Gannat in 2019, for example, we stayed with locals who became our family; the festival expanded from the festival site with its tents into the small town, which itself became the setting for the performances of folklore groups from all over the world. When the festival was over and we got back home, we had the feeling of returning from a little trip around the world, but also of leaving a secondary world that had been constituted by the density and intensity of the festival.

There is no denying that the common denominators of previous festivals are also in a state of flux. A re-definition might be recommended when it comes to virtual festivals.

A festival "takes place" – means it happens in a (specific) place.

With the virtual festival, we can no longer speak of a **fixed, localizable space**; the stage of the festival is a **decentralised** one, such as Zoom or another video conference platform. The performances of the festival - for the most part - "take place" where they originate and come live or mediatized across our screens. Both visitors and participants are no longer dependent on travelling either. Instead, one can stay where s/he is to attend the festival.

Speaking of time: the location is one thing, the **time** is another; here it becomes even more complex. During the festival, we act in shared "festival time" – as long as the zoom link works, as long as we are online, we are participating in the festival. For attending a festival of world cultures, we all join in from our respective time zones to witness the peculiar temporality of the festival. The very heterogeneous audience time affects (more than usual) the individual reception of the festival. It makes a difference whether I join in at 3 a.m. (like the [Famille LeBlanc](#) troupe from Canada at the Janapada festival's opening on 27 November, 2021), at 7

p.m., like my colleagues in Australia, or early in the morning at 9 a.m., like my European neighbours.

Also the experienced time matters here. If I just pointed out that festivals are usually multi-day, I implied that the festival events are spread over several days. It is a definite interruption of everyday life. A particular “festival time”, if you will. The *Janapada Virtual Festival*, like other virtual festivals, is set up over several days of interruption. On four Saturdays, the festival continues. Before, after and in between, however, we go back to our everyday lives. We interrupt the festival by our everyday lives, not vice versa.

Place and time are important constituents of festivals, but not the only ones. Because, of course, the **content of the festival** also matters.

The *Festival des Cultures du Monde* as well as the *Janapada Festival* are dedicated to folklore culture. Presentation, preservation and mediation of cultural diversity and cultural heritage in the world are central parameters and objectives. The international list of **UNESCO** lists 500 forms of intangible cultural heritage. The website states about [the Intangible Cultural Heritage convention](#) the following:

"The Convention promotes the safeguarding of knowledge and skills necessary for traditional craftsmanship and cultural practices transmitted from generation to generation, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, and knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe."²

Be it dance, theatre, music, festivals, handicrafts or customs – intangible cultural heritage is alive and is supported by human knowledge and skills. The word "heritage" includes the passing on, preserving, and also the responsibility of those who inherited, – this is us. If festivals like this one take these aspects into account, it also means that they can do so within

² <https://en.unesco.org/news/intangible-cultural-heritage-committee-meets-decide-new-inscriptions> [Last accessed 3 Dec, 2021]

the framework of the given possibilities and conditions. Nora O Murchú, the curator of [Transmediale Festival](#) 2021, formulated her curatorial guideline for the festival in an interview.

She says:

"We decelerate the festival and let the audience participate in different ways while considering issues like inequality, climate and sustainability. In my opinion, the pandemic has shown that we can no longer ignore these things. It has given us the reason to rethink the circumstances in general."³

Murchú's attitude resonates in the agenda of the curators of the *Theatre of the World Festival* of the [International Theatre Institute \(ITI\)](#) for 2023, Chiaki Soma and Kyoko Iwaki. On the occasion of the official presentation of the outline of the festival⁴, the curators pointed out that, in the face of the current global situation, they work with the adversities and obstacles of the global crisis; but also with the reflection that the months of standstill and reorientation have meant in the cultural sector: Soma and Iwaki take their function as curators literally – the Latin *curare* means "to care for, to nurture" –, and also keep in mind the care, the nurturing, the looking after – not only of art, but also of the artists and visitors themselves. In connection with this, they emphasize, as does the curator of the Transmediale (see above), the importance of keeping an eye on sustainability and climate.

SUSTAINABILITY

Virtual meeting environments will never be able to replace social interaction, a shared physical presence, a handshake or a hug. And yet they are certainly cost-saving alternatives that can

³ Orig.: „Wir entschleunigen das Festival und lassen das Publikum auf unterschiedliche Weise teilhaben, während wir Themen wie Ungleichheit, Klima und Nachhaltigkeit berücksichtigen. Meiner Meinung nach hat die Pandemie gezeigt, dass wir diese Dinge nicht mehr ignorieren können. Sie hat uns den Anlass für ein generelles Überdenken der Gegebenheiten geliefert.“ Nora O Murchú in an interview with Tilman Baumgärtel, *KUNSTFORUM*, Vol 272; my translation (NL).

⁴ The ITI Academy | Day 2: Outlook to Theater der Welt 2023 with Curators Chiaki Soma and Kyoko Iwaki <https://youtu.be/eDA35tu54QQ>. [Last accessed 3 Dec, 2021].

sustain academic and cultural operations. It is likely that they will continue to exist even after cultural and educational institutions reopen. Not only because teachers, researchers and students have become accustomed to them, but also because they have recently opened up new forms of participation that can certainly have an enriching effect on professional discourse and cultural practices. This had and still has advantages: more participation, greater reach, lower costs, not to mention the ecological footprint. For some time now, the many conference trips in the Academia, for example, had become a climate and university policy issue⁵; a rethink was urgently recommended. And the same applies to large cultural events and festivals. Festivals also involve interventions in urban or rural spaces, with indispensable journeys by performers and visitors.

I consider sustainability to be an essential responsibility that we also have as scholars and cultural workers. This does not mean that I want to make a plea for the abolition of real encounters. Not at all.

It is no coincidence that my memory of the 2019 Gannat festival is so vivid. It was blisteringly hot, then raining cats and dogs, we hardly had time to eat because there was always something going on, we lived for days in an olfactory and linguistic “cocktail” and were continuously in exchange with locals, cultural workers and scholars from all over the world, eating, laughing, drinking and dancing together, while drums or music were always sounding somewhere in the background. I have never experienced this quality in a Zoom before; I cannot deny that. And yet I am willing to preserve these experiences in their quality, but reduce them in their quantity. Simply for contributing to preserve, protect and present cultural goods.

MEDIATION

And that brings me to a final point I would like to make here. That of **mediation**. As cultural workers as well as teachers and scholars, mediation is a major goal of our work or passion.

⁵ See, among others, the article „Großteil der Emissionen bei Konferenzen vermeidbar“, in *Forschung und Lehre* online, 4 September, 2019, <https://www.forschung-und-lehre.de/forschung/grossteil-der-emissionen-bei-konferenzen-vermeidbar-2098/>.

The festival allows the presentation of cultural products, be they immaterial or material goods; mediation often does not take place in a direct way, but in extra spaces, such as booklets or conferences, summer schools or workshops that accompany the festival. A virtual festival can link performances and their academic, discursive/accompanying mediation more directly. And it can bring world cultures closer to the people of the world in an economically and ecologically more friendly way. Perhaps even to more people than before. Because digital accessibility is increasing. Because the multilingualism of the festival community is more obvious and easier to realize digitally. Because the parameters of space and time of the festival are changing and the cultural performances are thus bringing a larger audience with them. We at home can now finally be part of it as a family; before, festival visits and conference trips were always part of my job. Now they are more natural in the private sphere.

Change is a constant. Also in the transmission of cultural heritage,
– which gains in value as the world is changing.