



A very personal report about real and virtual presence

by Martina Marti

When the Hungarian Ministry for Culture invited me to participate at their conference "The Contribution of Culture to the Implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy" I just came from a month of rehearsals, 2 work-in-process performances and a week's workshop initiating a new devised dance piece. Traveling to Budapest I was desperately trying to get into the topic, this much I got, the strategy in question was the EU's growth strategy for the coming decade. But what did they mean by culture? And what was again behind all those other words: sustainability? competitiveness? Growth?

On the airplane I realised that my mind took me back to the rehearsal room, virtual now but all the more present after the intensive time spent in it during the past weeks. So trying to get into the EU's strategy paper and formulating an opinion about it was a rather tough task. I indulged in the fantasy of the virtual rehearsal room until Budapest brought me back to reality with its stunning beauty: the royal palace and the Matthias church light up against the dark blue night sky.

The next morning I sit in the amazing hall of the Academy of Science, take in the ceiling and wall paintings, the statues and the decoration. This all seems very unreal... like a virtual tour through another century...

The virtual rehearsal room is tempting me and I'm allowing myself to process some of the artistic ideas of the past weeks... Then Commissioner Andrulla Vassiliou takes the floor and I force myself back from the virtual to the real. I don't know whether it's because the virtual rehearsal room back home feels more real than the hall I'm sitting in but all I take in from Ms Vassiliou's speech are words like investment, measurable impact, maximisation and growth. Then she captures my attention with a quote by Kant: "science is organised knowledge,

wisdom is organised life"... I learn that Europe 2020 is mainly an economic strategy that is supposed to help Europe exit from the current crisis. And even though culture (still not sure what they mean by that) is not mentioned in the strategy, all seem to agree that culture is a driving force to increase the competitiveness and economic performance of the EU.

Everyone here very comfortably uses the word culture, but it is not clear to me what they mean by it... By the end of the morning, Professor Throsby from the Macquarie University in Sidney relieves me: his model of concentric circles explains finally what culture means: in this model the arts are at the core with cultural and related industries around it in circles. The insistence of economists to put everything into more or less colourful graphs does seem to have its benefits... Culture here then is a very large concept indeed...

The opening plenary ends with the sales pitch of the moderators trying to attract listeners to their respective working sessions in the afternoon. The moderator of the working group I'm asked to contribute to presents what we'll be talking about and explains that Europe 2020 is a cultural project in its own right, according to him there's no way of going back before the crisis, a paradigm shift has happened. He definitely captures my attention with this statement. I dream of my rehearsal room...

Over lunch I get to know a Hungarian journalist whose less than rough German language skills don't prevent him from giving me indications on how to get to the contemporary arts centre Trafó the following day and when he hears that I'm about to give a presentation he offers me more and more red wine. It seems the belief that wine loosens the tongue prevails in all cultures...

I join my colleagues of group 3 "sustainable growth" in a majestic room which not only seems too big for the occasion but also too official. As the first speaker starts his presentation I definitely lock the door of the virtual rehearsal room. I learn about green culture, that which does not pollute our minds, a culture that facilitates sustainable development. I learn about magenta culture which is the opposite: mass culture, culture of celebrities, a culture that does not offer any community experience. I'm happy when the next speaker asks whether culture should support the EU strategy or the strategy culture. It seems to me that this is a very justified question... I witness the enthusiasm of the next speaker talking about eco-design and recycled utilitarian beauty and the need for sustainable culture to be funny and beautiful. I wonder whether sustainable culture would not simply mean to consume less rather than buying a clean conscious by consuming rubbish turned into funny beauty. I wonder a lot... and then it is my turn to talk.

On-The-Move is a not-for-profit organisation providing information about cultural mobility mainly to individual artists and small organisations. So for the purpose of my presentation I decide to take the point of view of an artist looking at this strategy paper. I also explain that for me culture means the arts. I feel the need to narrow things down, to be concrete and specific, to talk about what I know and to give words meaning.

I tell about the study Excited Atoms which OTM carried out a year ago to map how artists engage in virtual mobility. Out of curiosity and a desire to connect to people, artists use more and more information and communication technologies in their artistic practice. The form virtual mobility takes is as diverse as any other kind of human or artistic expression. This year OTM commissioned a study about green mobility. The aim is to produce a practical handbook that gives artists and arts organisations concrete advice on how to address environmental issues in the creation and presentation of their work. Finally, I return to the question of this conference: How can culture contribute to the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy? Asked how she is involved in virtual mobility, an artist quoted in the virtual mobility study said: "By inventing and building tools, not to make profit but to produce change in situations which seem to call for it." The conference participants in Budapest all seem to agree on the importance of the arts and culture as a part of the EU 2020 strategy. I think it's actually a good thing they are excluded. It seems to me that we need something that stands outside this value system of profit maximisation and competitiveness. I therefore propose to reformulate the question: how can culture challenge the Europe 2020 strategy? I am surprised that the EU comes up with a growth strategy to help us out of the crisis when it is this ideology of growth that got us into the crisis in the first place. I for my part do not see any signs of change in post-crisis Europe. Does Europe really need a growth strategy? Does the world really need a competitive Europe? When talking about sustainability, I at least think it means that we need to change our attitude and our behaviour. What we need is something that challenges our magenta lifestyle, not because celebrities are bad but because ultimately consumerism is what is not green. What we need is something that teaches us to see the world through the eyes of another person, something that promotes an understanding of the world that is not based on how competitive we are in the global market. This "something" is the arts.

My audience is attentive, the moderator expresses his gratefulness for "another point of view before the break". Then a voice from the floor argues that you can have a stronger influence if you're in the tent rather than on the outside and therefore culture needs to be part of the strategy and its implementation. I have only one answer to that: I am here. My presence is very real now.

The following morning the Hungarian theatre director Árpád Schilling presents his community work. He talks about how creativity is an expression of freedom. In his work he has seen how people release their creative potential within a community, how children make the adult experience that someone else can also be right... For Schilling, creativity can also mean "to be different" - if someone is free he or she can behave strangely. And yes, Schilling is behaving strangely in this gathering. Not necessarily because he uses a slightly different vocabulary, one that is admittedly closer to my own, but because his point of view is different. Creative potential must be used not to create jobs, to generate growth and profit, but because it exists in all of us and unleashing it will make us live life as an experience, strengthen our communities and help us organise life - maybe even find more wisdom in how we organise life.

I'm thinking of all those who keep saying that we need to talk "their" language, the language of economists, that we need to measure the "impact of culture" to justify "investment" in it. And I'm starting to think that maybe the "we" who feel the need to talk like that, don't do it because they have to but because they don't have any other vocabulary, because it's difficult to unleash this creativity, to be different, to behave oddly, because it's hard work to imagine something else.