

22

Belonging and Unbelonging: The cultural purpose of festivals

Tessa Gordziejko

Introduction

This chapter illustrates the inherent dualism of the European festival traditions and how these have translated into contemporary arts festivals. It is not a history, and focuses primarily on contemporary practice, whilst drawing attention to the continuities of cultural purpose which could be interpreted as fulfilling fundamental human and cultural needs – the need to embrace community and identity whilst at the same time giving license to subversion, challenge and the unfamiliar.

In its central section, this chapter examines the London 2012 *Cultural Olympiad*, which enabled a diversity of national and regional identities to be expressed through its programmes of work. It also enabled important new art works to be presented by a number of partner festivals across the UK. But most significantly, the four year *Olympiad*' period (2008-2012) enabled projects to be grown from ground level upwards and grand ambitions to be realised, demonstrating on a large scale, a previously hidden trend towards 'slow art': the long-term embedding of partnerships between artists and communities.

Background

In February 2012 the Jerwood Charitable Foundation with *LIFT* and the *South Bank Festival* organised a symposium called the 'Future of Festivals' (Jerwood Charitable Foundation 2012). One of the questions asked on the day by Tim Etchells, Director of Forced Entertainment (Etchells, 2012), was: With what purpose do we convene? Belonging or Unbelonging?

The contributions from that symposium made visible a proposition that the model for the 'new' European festival has been developed drawing on the traditional purpose of 'Belonging' - celebrating locality, identity, community

- with the apparently newer purpose of 'Unbelonging' – risk taking, bringing in the new (international), innovation. But as the following section proposes, both concepts are rooted in both an older established dimension and a new dimension.

The artists at the symposium focused strongly on the purpose of the new, "to change the idea of what is possible" (Etchells), for the festival "to re-imagine and rewrite itself at will, spilling into new shapes and new ideas" (Andy Field, Director Forest Fringe). However, my proposition is that for a festival to achieve the "wild amnesiac vitality" (Field) of Unbelonging, it draws on traditions of Belonging: rootedness, community and the cyclical familiarity provided by the calendar.

Belonging and Unbelonging – echoes of the past

A fuller understanding is based on the concept of misrule that runs through festivals ancient and modern. The Lord of Misrule, a figure featuring in medieval festivals across many European countries, symbolises the world turning upside down, the upending of social hierarchies and norms. Misrule or license for dissent is played out in the traditions of the masked carnival, most notably the Venetian carnival. Indeed, as historian James H. Johnson observes, "Today *carnivalesque* can describe an attitude, a frame of mind, a joyously subversive stance toward authority in general" (Johnson 2011: 42). Another key theme which occurred in a number of European festivals and feast days is connection with the spiritual world, with roots which are clearly present in modern Halloween customs and other occasions when "as happens in the feasts of renewal of many cultures, certain types of social disorder were actively encouraged during the period of the festival because this promoted the renewing influence of the Otherworld" (Konratiev 1997: 4). Clearly the Belonging/Unbelonging dynamic is enacted through these ritual connections with the spirit world of ancestors and with familiar cycles of the seasons that also celebrate place and community.

Contemporary festivals – belonging as shared passion and the artist tribe

This next section will focus on the application of this axis to contemporary festivals and in particular to an examination of how festivals and their cultural purposes relate to it. It can be observed that an 'artist tribe' often forms among groups of artists in a particular area, region or city where there is a vibrant cultural scene. Nowhere is this more evident than during an arts fes-

tival, in the festival venues and bars and early morning symposia discussing the work of the day or days before. Because of the often solitary nature of the way artists work, they huddle together in social groups whenever they can. Artists are particularly susceptible to what Tim Etchells calls “the possibility of community - in the world, in the city, across the city, in the theatre or performance space” (2012), in search of a sense of belonging through shared work, which often finds its fulfilment through festivals.

Similarly, the specialist festival of shared cultural passion and art form – jazz, folk, literature, digital art – brings a particular form of cultural belonging among people from often diverse and far flung communities. This is palpable at *Celtic Connections*, Glasgow’s annual folk, roots and world music festival in late January. *Celtic Connections* celebrates Celtic music and its connections to cultures across the globe and each year programmes around 2,000 musicians performing music with Celtic roots and resonances from around the world. The festival attributes its phenomenal success – attracting 100,000 people to a festival in Scotland in January is no mean feat – to the passions of its founders, passions which are shared across the world by musicians and audiences, and which create a deep sense of belonging and community across its 300 events celebrating the Celtic cultural diaspora.

So among the Belonging and global interconnection of the contemporary European festival, where do we look to find the Unbelonging, the misrule, the disguise, the Otherworld?

As Jude Kelly put it at the FOF Symposium, “festivals are for getting dialogue between artists and audiences and creating spaces to say difficult and dangerous things; often the festival is a permission to try something new and big which might frighten people in a venue context.” Whilst not all festivals achieve this, the examples in the next section show how some contemporary festivals have diversified their models as their content has evolved and expanded increasingly utilising spaces which are not conventional performance venues, and which source content from communities and audiences. Even traditionally venue-based festivals such as *Edinburgh* now feature site specific, immersive work such as Look Left, Look Right’s *You Once Said Yes* in 2013.

Parallel cities and co-creation

Rimini Protokoll is a theatre company which creates such new model festivals. *Parallel Cities* is a project described as “an international festival where the artists don’t have to travel”. There were four partner cities – Berlin, Warsaw,