

Islands and Bridges. Report on EFAH's Annual Conference in Helsinki 2006

Islands
and Bridges

14th EFAH General Assembly
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This year's EFAH conference sought "to investigate and understand the value and importance of intercultural dialogue in the European context", offering an opportunity for participants to make their voice heard.

The conference programme was designed to take advantage of the experience and ideas of inspired practitioners and to immerse

participants into a debate on issues of importance to intercultural dialogue: social cohesion; national identity; racial discrimination and the sense of the individual.

The conference offered a forum for exchange between cultural workers on their activities in relation to intercultural dialogue: cultural co-operation across national boundaries; intercultural collaborations within national boundaries; cultural work by migrant communities eager to maintain their heritage and traditions; diaspora connections by artists across national boundaries; cultural work by indigenous minorities eager to maintain their heritage and traditions; new cultural work by people of immigrant background within one country.

Given that EFAH's members and constituency are key players in "shaping a better landscape for culture in Europe", the conference looked at a number of policy initiatives on intercultural dialogue from the EU and the Council of Europe but also national models and public policies aiming at the creation of a "shared space".

A variety of discourses and approaches to the vast issue were heard:



expression of identity.

Jette Sandahl focused on definitions of identity, which resist dominant currents in society, such as Western rationality. Stating that minority culture is torn between the demand for inclusion and resistance, she offered a plea for respect towards the "strategic invocation of essentialism": when individuals or groups relate to a certain set of values or characteristics which are not truly essential to them, but become so as a way to resist mainstream pressure. Against this background she called for respect of tendencies for separatism as a form of resistance and distinct

Gus Casely-Hayford took a completely different approach, projecting a scenario in which electronic spaces are actually replacing museums, allowing everybody to be a curator of his/her own choice of art. Digital interactivity challenges the way we are defined and allows identity to be more easily defined by global parameters, allowing us to interact directly on a global level, or a local one, if we choose, making us part

of a virtual demography, defying traditional sociological categories. He projected a model of society in which a variety of cultural realities exist alongside each other,



allowing individuals to make their own dynamic choices, turning identity into a dynamic process.



Dragan Klaic was sceptical about the impact of the UNESCO convention on cultural diversity in a climate in which Western European countries turn towards furthering homogeneity rather than diversity. This, he said, is only partially diluted by the Internet, especially with cultural institutions not being able to keep up with the dynamics dictated by the speed of Internet related innovation.

The question to him remains if the concept of cultural diversity furthers the creation of parallel ghettos of “benign neglect”, with all the well-known consequences from the Yugoslav scenario. The creation of new identities would much rather have to go hand in hand with a clearly defined strategy or policy for “intercultural competence” on institutional and on personal levels.

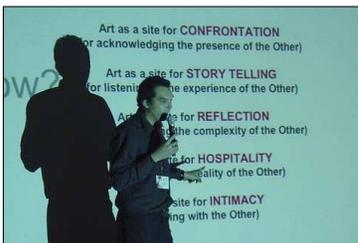
Dragan Klaic renewed his appeal for an artistic leadership programme, which could train young European artists in “intercultural competence” and enable them to conduct trans-national projects. The idea was taken up in a later discussion by the Council of Europe’s Robert Palmer, who offered commitment and support to such a project.

A number of parallel workshops discussed culture and diversity in relation to other sectors or policy areas, such as community, urbanism, foreign policy, human rights, tourism, education and development. Based on the discussions, some new ideas for structural linkages between the cultural sector and other sectors were identified, e.g. positioning artists as such when they work in the educational sector instead of having to “invent” a lecturer activity. By institutionalising these linkages, advocacy for culture would be embedded in a vaster advocacy pattern for civil society, forming strategic alliances.



A new tool that EFAH used at the conference was that of so-called ‘action interviews’ with small groups, in which the relevance of intercultural dialogue for organisations represented at the conference was sounded out. The results, combined with an ongoing parallel interviewing effort directed at member organisations will help EFAH and interested partners in mapping the variety of concepts and practices, and defining appropriate policy tools to approach the complexity of the issue.

A further plenary showcased public and institutional initiatives for intercultural dialogue. A Dutch governmental initiative to foster intercultural dialogue in a top-down approach was started in reaction to the killing of Theo van Gogh; the Swedish government dedicated the year 2006 to cultural diversity and is attempting to mainstream this issue across various policy fields. The ECF’s ‘AlmostReal’ project tries to research alternative ways of cooperation



among cultural workers in a cross-regional approach.

Aims, political circumstances and actors involved differ in each of the showcased actions, while the overall goal is similar. The showcases demonstrated that there are no prefabricated solutions and that different customised approaches are needed for each situation.

The second day of the conference was dedicated to the European public policy making side of the matter. Odile Quintin, Director General of the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture, and Robert Palmer, Director for Culture and Cultural and Natural Heritage at the Council of Europe's Directorate



General IV, were given the opportunity to present their organisations' approaches: the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008), an EU initiative, and the various diversity related programs of the CoE, as well as the stock-taking exercise to be compiled in a CoE "White Book" on intercultural dialogue in 2008. Both spoke out strongly in favour of a dialogue with the cultural sector as part of civil

society, and demanded an equal partnership with civil society. They asked the conference participants what their demands were to make the partnership real. The responses from participants circled around issues of cultural mobility, citizenship, multiple identities, definitions of multiculturalism, stakeholder involvement, inter-institutional dialogue, and finally culminated in the question of cultural policy mainstreaming and an express EU policy on culture and the issue of dialogue and the constitutional debate. The criticism towards the European institutions in general and the expressions of hope and/or frustrations with their performance so far took a variety of forms and directions, indicating that conference participants had rather differing focuses and that a consistent position towards European institutions is far from being achieved.

Nevertheless, a change in the atmosphere of dialogue between the two European institutions seems to be in the offing. At the moment, this appears to be more driven by two personalities, and it will certainly depend on their continued will and commitment to make this co-operation more productive than is currently the case.

As for the conference participants, the challenge will now be to sustain the momentum and translate the two organisations' offer for partnership into concrete policy steps.



In the concluding plenary, EFAH president Raj Isar, ECF director Gottfried Wagner and prospective platform coordinator Sabine Frank presented a concrete initiative carried by EFAH and ECF: the civil society platform for intercultural dialogue. The platform will seek cooperation of cultural organisations and civil society organisations from other sectors in an alliance

aimed at achieving concrete policy steps towards an integrated and EU strategy for intercultural dialogue.

Conference commentator Baroness Lola Young reflected on the dynamics of the conference. All this from a position of a friendly critic and advisor capturing the energy of the various panels and directing it again towards the participants. She appealed to the participants' power of reflection by drawing together several lines of thought: the need to clarify terminology, and to imbue policy driven terms with life and energy, or the fact that there is no diversity without equality, or that the economic side of the issues of diversity and the effect of technology on identity should not be ignored.



Thierry Geoffroy-Colonel challenged the participants' willingness to 'dialogue' by asking us to provide a lock of hair for an artistic experiment and commenting on cultural exchange in a more prosaic approach; Adel Abidin displayed a video installation and showed a film contrasting the 'Crazy Days' of war-time Iraq

with those of the sales of Helsinki's major department store; Naseem Khan and Chris Torch had the walk-through area plastered with questions and (non-)answers relating to intercultural dialogue. All these artistic interventions presented not only a framework for, but became integral part of the conference, inviting to reflection, encouraging action and reflecting upon diversity and dialogue.



The opening night was marked by performances of the Russian group AES+F, "deconstructing paranoias" through constructed images of 'islamised' Western city scapes, and the Cassandra choir, a choir composed of immigrant women bringing together diverse song traditions. The event was prominently placed in the Old City Hall of Helsinki, the former residence of the Russian Governor of Helsinki - a surrounding which testifies of a different, imperial type of cultural exchange.

The two post-industrial locations for the conference (the Cable factory) and the conference party (Korjaamo Culture Factory) were excellent examples of how Helsinki knows to combine public and private cultural initiatives into a distinct cultural landscape. And the cultural office of the city of Helsinki showed in a remarkable way how partnership in organising such an event can work.