

MIRROR IMAGES

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Cultural Collaboration and Civil Society

Francois Matarasso: an essay commissioned by Tandem to mark five years' work

For Europeans, freedom is found not in autonomy but in embeddedness. To be free is to have access to many interdependent relationships. The more communities one has access to, the more options one has for living a full and meaningful life. It is *inclusivity* that brings security—belonging, not belongings.

Jeremy Rifkin

THE WINE DARK SEA

In Homer the sea is always 'wine dark'. That has puzzled many who know the Aegean, that islanded part of the Northern Mediterranean separating Greece and Turkey, Europe and Asia. These waters, after all, are famous for their limpidity: Bulgarians call it *Byalo More*, the White Sea. But Homer was not a scientist, nor the author of tourist guides. He was a poet and poets deal in metaphor. The juxtaposition of wine with darkness evokes the sea's dual nature, at once intoxicating and dangerous. Seas are liminal spaces, territories of transition that simultaneously separate and connect us. They promise hope and opportunity, but threaten death and disappearance too.

This duality is desperately real for every fragile boatload of refugees escaping war and poverty, their hearts fixed on a European dream. Thousands have lost their lives in the Mediterranean, sometimes observed by unblinking cameras.² Those who have survived the sea crossing have found shelter, but not always welcome, in the lands of the sea's northern shore.

Europeans have been unsettled by this urgent yet unsought contact with their neighbours, despite their own history of crossing the sea as colonisers, soldiers and migrants. But their wars are mostly forgotten now, except by the very old. In marking its centenary,

Europe sees the First World War pass into history. The sombre commemorations may inadvertently have encouraged its people to believe that 'never again' was an accomplished fact instead of a commitment requiring constant renewal.

But if war seems distant to them now, the insecurity produced by economic and social shocks has made millions of Europeans feel vulnerable once more. Losers in the globalisation gamble, the continent's own poor feel unheard, disenfranchised by the very democracy their leaders extol. Too much pressure, they say, and find politicians ready to echo and amplify their fears. Bodies wash ashore on Greek islands; a terrorist shoots sunbathers on a Tunisian beach. For many now, the mid-land sea is no longer intoxicating. It's just dark.

LAMPEDUSA MIRRORS

That story dominates the headlines, but it is still a story, one way of interpreting reality's immense complexity. And it is not the only story being told about how Europeans and their neighbours meet across the wine-dark sea.

*An island: Lampedusa. Lampedusa the symbol, Lampedusa the mirage, Lampedusa the nightmare. Lampedusa mirrors dreams and frustrations, hopes and stereotypes of two lands, Tunisia and Italy, united and divided by the Mediterranean Sea...*³

Lampedusa is 113 kilometres from the coast of Tunisia and almost twice as far from Sicily. Italy's most southerly island, it is a natural goal for people fleeing Africa and the Middle East. Its six thousand inhabitants have sheltered many times that number of refugees in recent years. They have also buried those who did not survive the crossing.

Between March 2014 and June 2015, artists from Italy and Tunisia jointly embarked on a project to understand better these experiences. They called it 'Lampedusa Mirrors'. The partnership was led by *Eclosion d'Artistes* in Tunis and *Teatro dell'Argine* in Bologna; it also involved *L'Art Vivant* and the *Tunisian Institut Supérieur d'Art Dramatique*. In its own way, each of these organisations nurtures the creativity of youth. Like ships, but with less risk, they carry hopeful young people towards new lives in which they can fulfil their potential as artists, citizens and human beings.

In October 2014 Micaela Casalboni and Giulia Franzaresi from *Teatro dell'Argine* spent ten days with colleagues in Tunis. They began by sharing experiences with Tunisian theatre makers and educators to develop a common pool of practice and ideas. With that foundation, the artists opened the project to young people from poor districts of Tunis, using workshop and theatre activities to investigate their experiences, dreams and fears

about migration. The exchange culminated in a performance by 45 young people and theatre artists at the Hraria Maison de Jeunes and the Mass'Art Theatre.

Three months later, two Tunisian artists, Moez Mrabet and Monem Chouayet, came to Bologna to work on a programme that mirrored what had been done in Tunis. Again, work was done first with the trained theatre makers before being opened up to young Italians who now share their schools and clubs with refugees making their lives in Italy. Again, dialogue between teenagers with so little and so much in common was the heart of the creative process, forming its narrative and emotional spine. Again, the young people's experiences, on both sides of the sea, was combined in a theatre performance shared with the public at the end of the ten-day exchange.

'Lampedusa Mirrors was the opportunity to get young professionals of the Tunisian theatre interested in an alternative artistic approach, confronting the problems of the here and now, thanks to a field of work that reaches out to local communities.'

Moez Mrabet

The two halves of Lampedusa Mirrors reunited in March 2015, during a cultural event in Bologna with artists from a dozen European and Arab nations. During these days of sharing ideas and experience, there were three more theatre performances, film screenings and public debates around the project. The continuing friendship between the Italian and Tunisian artists has led to further events and screenings of a documentary about this process of intercultural creation. That film has brought the story to many more people at Terra di Tutti Art Festival, in Bologna's high schools and at festivals in Ukraine and Germany. In October 2015, the film was shown in Lampedusa, during the island's festival⁴; the project was also presented at Bozart in Brussels in a season about migration in the summer of 2016.⁵

Through these connections, and the human relationships on which they depend, the voices of those most affected by the Mediterranean migration crisis have been carried from the backstreets of Tunis and the playgrounds of Bologna to the symbolic heart of the European Union in Brussels. That cannot solve – or even influence the response to – this weeping trauma, but democracy is the essence of the European idea. And having a voice is the essence of democracy.

THE TANDEM IDEA

At a time of growing tension between states, groups and people, when culture is abused as a mark of distinction or a cause for hostility, Tandem defends the creative value of dialogue and cooperation.⁶

This ambitious, complicated Mediterranean partnership did not happen by chance. The organisations involved had neither the knowledge nor the resources to reach each other across the sea. The link was made possible by Tandem, a unique international programme founded in 2011 by the European Cultural Foundation and MitOst, a Berlin-based civil society organisation. Lampedusa Mirrors was just one of more than 160 cross-border collaborations the programme has enabled during the past five years

Tandem exists to connect civil society in the European Union and in neighbouring regions, especially Eastern Europe, Turkey, the Middle East and North Africa. It is implemented with partners in those regions, including Anadolu Kültür in Istanbul and Al-Mawred Al-Thaqafy in Beirut. Tandem activities have also been supported by the Robert Bosch, Mercator, Doen, Cariplo and Stavros Niarchos Foundations, state-funded institutions in Germany, Norway and the UK, the European Union and other public actors such as the Dutch Fonds Cultuurparticipatie.

Boats, whether they are handsome, functional or leaky, serve to cross water. The journey is their purpose. So it is with Tandem, whose cultural activities – so visual, so interesting, so attractive – should not be mistaken for its purpose. Tandem is a civil society initiative promoting cross-border cooperation. It uses artistic resources, but it is not a cultural exchange programme, designed simply to help artists from different countries to work together. Such initiatives are admirable, but there are greater ambitions at stake here. For Tandem, culture is a means of strengthening civil society and thus protecting fundamental values of tolerance, human rights, democracy and respect for diversity, in and around the European space.

We are used to thinking of culture as the expression of a European idea. Less familiar, but equally potent, is its value as a way of testing, strengthening and extending that idea. Culture is not an object but an act. It is in doing that we express our values and use them to make the society to which we aspire. European culture is not an accomplished fact but a commitment requiring constant renewal

Tandem does not see culture as a universal – if curiously Eurocentric – ideal. Rather, it imagines culture as a way of conducting human relations that values imagination, creativity and artistic expression because they are necessary to a tolerant and democratic public space. Culture is universal because these values and behaviours exist everywhere, even if their expression varies from place to place.

CULTURE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Like all citizens and their organisations, artists are part of civil society. They have a distinctive role within it when their work gives voice and visibility to people who are marginalised or not easily heard. In all societies some groups and interests dominate, thanks to their position, strength or control of resources. For everyone else, culture may be the only legitimate (or safe) form of expression. It has enabled women, ethnic or religious groups, people with mental ill health or disabilities, the young, LGBTI people, foreigners and many others to explore identity, validate their experience, find common ground, organise and assert their human rights. In enabling this, cultural action can be a crucible of social development and civil society. Having a voice is the essence of democracy – and culture can be a powerful voice.

In reflecting on how artistic experiences might contribute to the formation of civil society the Flemish sociologist Pascal Gielen and the Dutch philosopher Thijs Lijster identify a series of processes which they call ‘the civil chain’.

The Civil Chain: 1, Emotion; 2, (self-)rationalization; 3, Communication; 4, De-Privatization (or going public); and 5, (Self-)Organization.

Pascal Gielen and Thijs Lijster

The first three links in this chain are easy enough to see. Art can offer experiences that touch us in many ways but it is particularly effective at connecting with our feelings. We are moved by music or drama, by images and colours, by representation and ritual. At the same time it allows us to express existing feelings – particularly those provoked by difficult social or political situations. Art has often been used to give visibility and coherence to people’s frustration anger, hope and outrage, as has been seen in public space from Madrid to Cairo, Istanbul to Reykjavik in recent years. This is the first link.

Our response may be powerful, but unless art is being corrupted as propaganda (which is always something to guard against), we are aware of that response. Indeed art is important because it produces emotional responses of which we remain conscious. We do not forget that we are in a cinema or a theatre. We know that the actor playing Hamlet is not losing his mind: indeed, we recognise, at the same time, the actor and the character. This dual reality encourages us to recognise our feelings and so to question them. That conscious rationalisation also allows us to make choices about identification and rejection. Indeed, one difference between art and its corrupted cousin, propaganda, is that the second tries to keep us unaware so that we cannot choose but are simply swept along in the emotion. That is why people want to talk about the concert or play or film they have just seen. This is the second link.

That conversation is made possible by the stories, images, characters, situations, feelings and symbols created by the artists. In creating Hamlet, with his poetry and narrative, Shakespeare gave us a character through which we can explore not just mental breakdown and family tensions but much more complex existential experiences we cannot easily articulate – except by thinking about Hamlet. The French theorist, Pierre Bayard, even argues that such characters have an independent existence that facilitates our conversations whether or not we have even seen or read the works they come from.⁸ This is the third link in the Civil Chain.

‘Self-expression is all very well. Art is tougher, more purposeful, dangerous, and ultimately a means of change.’

Ann Jellicoe

What matters – at least as far as civil society development is concerned – is how feelings, reasoning and communication can translate into social mobilisation. The fourth link in Gielen and Lijster’s chain happens when private experiences and conversations become public, even collective. That can happen in many ways: the simplest example might be the increasing popularity of reading groups, where individuals get together to share their responses to books. In visual art, the increasing popularity of participatory approaches has brought contemporary ideas into public consciousness – rarely more sensationally than Spencer Tunick’s photographs of great naked crowds in their own streets. But it may be the performing arts – collective and civic from their earliest days – that make the easiest transition from private experience to public expression. They allow us to share some of our most intimate feelings, ideas and experiences in ways that feel safe, partly because of the difference between Hamlet and the actor. Art, we know, is not reality. But it is real.

The final link – and least secure, because it cannot be guaranteed – connects shared, communal, civic experiences to new understandings and a desire for change. Here, the ideas of Gielen and Lijster coincide with those of Manuel Castells, whose study of social movements triggered by the 2008 global financial crisis confirms both the importance of emotion as a starting point for inspiring action (and art as a way of articulating shared feelings) and some of the characteristics of new civil society organisations. In particular, he notes their spontaneous, non-hierarchical and cooperative nature, seeing them as self-reflexive and engaged principally with changing social values rather than pursuing programmes.¹⁰

Both theory and research show how artistic projects can move people, help them think and communicate and that in turn can lead to a collective consciousness and capacity for organisation. Empirical evidence, including from Tandem project reports, shows

how people enact those ideas, consciously and unconsciously, by working together on creative projects. But there is nothing inevitable about it. A community-oriented art project will not produce such results or strengthen civil society unless the actors involved set out with that purpose in mind and have the skills, resources and experience to create the right conditions. And that is where Tandem comes in.

THEORY AND REALITY

This abstract sketch of Tandem's core values and theories becomes more concrete when it is applied to the real experience of the Lampedusa Mirrors project. This Tandem collaboration was conceived by cultural organisations who clearly see themselves as part of civil society. They are committed, in various ways, to helping their societies overcome great contemporary challenges – in this case, the shared crisis of human migration. The lead partners' websites state this intention clearly:

'Un teatro multidisciplinare, internazionale, d'inclusione culturale, intergenerazionale e di promozione sociale.'

Teatro dell'Argine, Bologna¹⁸

'L'association aspire à instaurer et à développer un climat culturel libre et démocratique, à travers de pertinentes formations destinées aux nouveaux jeunes talents.'

Eclosion d'artistes, Tunis¹⁹

The choice of theatre – and an aesthetic that used imagery, symbolism and metaphor more than text or naturalism – allowed these civil society actors to create work that was very moving, both for those involved and for audiences. But they did not just produce emotion, which is easy and easily manipulated, or even give form to collective feelings of pain, anger and frustration at the migrant crisis. In workshops, interviews and discussions – including those between performers and audiences – the artists made space for people to reflect on and rationalise their own experiences and those of others.

It was theatre that enabled those experiences to be communicated, within and beyond the group. Art's distinctive quality is to be rational, but not *only* rational, accepting both. So a line of empty shoes can represent something precise – such as the drowned – but also evoke things much harder to put into words, such as the hope invested in a journey, a convoy of boats or the pain of loss. It might even evoke the hollowness of public responses to the situation: who knows? Many senses can be made of this image. Art is so

precious because it is at home in that liminal territory between what can and cannot be spoken, what we know and what we cannot express.

'Art is a means to the still centre, the moment of balance, the unchanging truth. Amidst all the triviality, muddle and distracting chaos of our lives we can open ourselves to art and sense a breathing tranquillity. Not dead, not fixed, but not moving.'

Ann Jellicoe¹⁸

Art's ability to ferry us between different shores of understanding is vital in a public space dominated by communications that are reductively simple, at best, or simply deceptive. When political divisions are daily widened by words of fear and hatred, the complexity of artistic statements are necessary – *vital* – firebreaks. They generally don't allow us to make simple judgements or to feel vindicated in our existing ideas. When art goes into the public arena, as did the performances and film screenings of Lampedusa Mirrors, its emotion, beauty and questions slow us down. It helps us listen to people we ignore or even disparage. It helps us be heard by those who have closed their minds and their borders.

Culture does not solve problems. Art is a method, not an answer. It does not contribute to civil society by telling us what we must do and giving us a plan for how to do it. It is not, as Manuel Castells might say, programmatic. The problems of migration – the stifled lives people are escaping, the pressures their arrival puts on other communities, the crime and the suffering – none of these changes because some artists in Tunisia and Italy work together on a theatre project.

But why should artists be expected to find solutions that elude nation states and international agencies? That is not their responsibility.

What Lampedusa Mirrors can do, and for some people did do, is touch hearts and minds. To help us feel and think differently about a situation and own our views because we have developed them for ourselves with others, and out of real experience. To motivate us to act differently in future, without telling us what that difference should be. And to bring us the friendships, the ideas, the resources and the creativity to help us do it.

PROGRAMMES NOT PROJECTS

Even with such desirable outcomes, a cultural project like Lampedusa Mirrors is a drop in the wine-dark sea. But again, it would be unfair to complain that a small initiative cannot transform the world: that is true of most human endeavour. But it is possible to

make salt water drinkable with enough drops of fresh. And Tandem is a programme that creates many fresh drops like Lampedusa Mirrors.

Since 2011, it has offered 15 separate editions, each comprising eight to 15 partnership projects on the same model as Lampedusa Mirrors. Because each edition lasts 18 months, there are normally several happening at once. More than 200 cities in the EU, Eastern Europe, Turkey, North Africa and the Middle East, and more than 320 cultural organisations have now been connected through cultural partnership projects.

The process is broadly consistent, though experience and (self-) reflection produce continual small changes. An open call for applications is issued and the response is normally high: the latest attracted 244 proposals. Of those, 30- 50 organisations are invited to an exchange lasting several days in which people meet peers and explore common interests. Following this, Tandems – partnerships of two organisations – develop and submit a collaboration proposal setting out what they want to do together, how and why they think it matters.

From these proposals a new cohort forms. These people collaborate as pairs on creative projects, and also share trainings with the whole group, contributing to and drawing on a wider pool of experience. Each person spends at least two weeks in their partner's organisation and country, learning from and about each other's reality. This can be practically, emotionally and culturally challenging – after all, the purpose is to help people go beyond their existing knowledge and expectations and that is never easy. But doing work in which you are experienced and gifted in a radically different context can be a powerfully transformative experience.

'It is a great gift to meet all the people I met in the last months, to hear about and share their (very personal) experiences which are sometimes very different to mine, and to learn how they deal with life, especially as it is so hard at the moment. I learned a lot.'

The creation of a public performance, exhibition or event is essential because it takes the exchange out of the small world of the arts organisations into the public space of a city. It requires the artists to make something that is of public interest, and that connects with issues faced by the community. So it is not surprising that Tandem projects have often focused on heritage, memory and identity, urban issues and social cohesion – issues of urgent and common concern today.

Public events are both a test of the work's resonance and a means by which it contributes to the wider ambitions of the Tandem programme. In Gielen and Lijster's terms, this is 'de-privatization (or going public)', the essential stage that allows cultural work

to contribute to civil society. The questions that arise and the conversations that follow are the beginnings of further action, perhaps with a wider or different group of people.

THE TANDEM DIFFERENCE

The process of learning from Tandem's first five years has involved many of those who have benefited from the work as well as the team itself. It has revealed obvious achievements, of which Lampedusa Mirrors is emblematic but just one among many. It has also revealed more subtle benefits in the change it has brought about for participants, their organisations and often the communities of which they are part. There have been problems. Nobody would expect civil society development in Ukraine, Egypt or Turkey to be simple, while austerity within the EU presents its own challenges. This is not an easy time to work in international cooperation or to defend the principle of cultural dialogue. But it is those difficulties that make Tandem's work important and its achievements so impressive.

The creation of new cross border links between cultural actors and the exchange of knowledge and experience have strengthened the work of independent cultural organisations working for tolerance and democratic dialogue. The networks that have been created are helping the partners to do further work together or with others in the Tandem family. In fact, with such a substantial body of work, Tandem's next challenge is how to capitalise on its networks, knowledge and experience.

Civil society is usually discussed within national frameworks, where it is a buffer between the state and the citizen, helping to protect the individual from the abuse of institutional power. Today, as Castells, Gielen and Lijster show, civil society is adopting transnational forms adapted to a globalising world where networks cross borders. The case for strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations, including cultural ones, to act within and beyond their territories acquires a new importance.

When politicians tell us that 'we are all in this together', they address their own tribe, within the confines of the nation state. The truth is that we are all in this together – but the 'all' is humanity, and 'this' is the planet. The crises that face us today are different according to which side of the border we live: Italy or Tunisia, Europe or Africa. But the crises affect us all: borders are increasingly permeable. When we look across the wine-dark sea, we look into a mirror. We need to get to know ourselves better. And there, Tandem can help.

Notes

- ¹ Rifkin, J., 2004, 'The European Dream' in *Utne* Sept./Oct. 2004, <http://www.utne.com/community/the-european-dream.aspx> (accessed 05.10.16)
- ² <http://www.msf.org/en/topics/mediterranean-migration> (accessed 05.10.16)

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- ³ 'Lampedusa Mirrors', The Project <http://teatrodelargine.org/site/lang/en-EN/page/45/project/30#default> (accessed 05.10.16)
- ⁴ <http://www.lampedusainfestival.com/2015.html> (accessed 05.10.16)
- ⁵ <http://www.bozar.be/en/activities/113866-lampedusa-day> (accessed 05.10.16)
- ⁶ François Matarasso, *Tandem Programme 2011-15, Lessons and Questions: A Discussion Paper*, unpublished paper for ECF and MitOst, March 2016
- ⁷ 2016, Gielen, P. & Lijster, T., *New Civil Roles and Organizational Models of Cultural Organizations*, University of Gronigen (unpublished research paper)
- ⁸ Bayard, P. 2008, 'L'Affaire du Chien des Baskerville', Paris: Minuit
- ⁹ Jellicoe, A. (1987) *Community plays: How to put them on*. London: Methuen, p.47
- ¹⁰ Castells, M. 2015, *Networks of Outrage and Hope, Social Movements in the Internet Age*, (2nd Edition), London: Polity Press, pp.247-256. Though it is not what Castells had in mind, the power of symbols, and the feelings they encapsulate, was very evident in the social movement that produced the political upheaval of the UK voting to leave the European Union.
- ¹¹ 'An international, intergenerational multidisciplinary theatre for cultural inclusion and social development': <http://teatrodelargine.org> (accessed 05.10.16)
- ¹² 'The association aspires to instil and develop a free and democratic culture through relevant training aimed at new young https://www.facebook.com/Eclosion-dartistes-100532163473718/about/?entry_point=page_nav_about_item&ref=page_internal (accessed 05.10.16)
- ¹³ Jellicoe, A. (1987) *Community plays: How to put them on*. London: Methuen, pp.46-7