Entering relationships – Thoughts on the cultural transformation paradigm in the time of Covid-19

An essay by Patrick S. Föhl and Suse Klemm

On the beaten paths of "crisis as an opportunity"

It's not just since the coronavirus pandemic that summoning "crisis as an opportunity" has been part of the background noise in cultural policy and cultural management discourses. In the context of Covid-19, however, this summoning seems rather euphemistic given the myriad human fortunes involved. At the same time it may seem a bit simple-minded as past years and decades have taught us that crises do not automatically lead to meaningful changes. Just think of the liberal paradigm of dynamism established by sociologist Andreas Reckwitz: The planning state should increasingly withdraw, regulate the markets, and individualisation and globalisation would advance social development. However, the undesirable consequences associated with this strategy became clear at the latest in the 2000s. The philosopher Isolde Charmin for example found that since the market cannot regulate threats like Covid-19, what now saves us in the crisis are the remnants of the old welfare state. As a consequence, she demands new concepts of the public and common good.

Do we now need to revert to the "strong-armed state"? Certainly not. But we need a move forward – ambitious as usual, devoid of meaning and posturing – even less. What is it really about? There were, and still are, many good reasons to break up fossilised public structures. It makes sense to anticipate market-based mechanisms, to demand participation and – instead of making conventional assertions, such as the systemic relevance of culture – to ask more questions, to find meaningful answers followed by coherent actions. In retrospect, we may find that our fixation on transformation has obscured the power and potential of existing structures. We have thought too much in terms of black or white, old versus new, or within the sectoral tension between public institutions and the independent scene. Why was that? The mere – not solution-oriented – criticism of existing circumstances and structures is socially accepted and the transformation of these is both particularly tedious and delicate. The contents and meanings of the term transformation often seem to be fundamentally not grasped, especially when it is used as a buzzword. In addition, the extent of what is required for transformative work is rarely grasped.

Pause, observe, listen, and perceive are values in themselves

Without question, transformation demands that we recognise that it is worth our while to search for innovations and that we are motivated to implement them courageously. But we must also fight for existing assets and recognise clear stances and not punish them for the sake of crippling consensus. Such moments of recognition and motivation are, of course, particularly powerful

during existential crises. Summoning "crisis as an opportunity" is not always wrong, but what are the common consequences? Pragmatism slogans run the risk of falling back into the trap of the dynamism paradigm. Through German reunification, the economic crises of the past thirty years, the mechanisms of globalisation, and the growing demands of a digital society, we have long been living with constant change. A real opportunity of enormous value may now lie in the quiet human abilities: pause, observe, listen, and perceive. Our biggest challenge is to endure the conditions that these make more visible and the uncomfortable pressure that they can trigger rather than to withdraw from them through hectic action; to ask honest questions and not quickly provide automated answers. The unknown is not new when we fill it with the known. What have we learned in recent years? What do we want to use this extraordinary phase for? What should we call for? In the post-corona phase, what should we absolutely retain from it? What can we do (even) better in future? What do we have to do to eliminate obvious weaknesses in the "system"? These are all the simpler and perhaps familiar questions. But the questions must be asked more boldly and freer from taboos. What do we actually do every day? Why and with what do we fill our overloaded days? What do we really want? What do we really need? What do we want to dare to do? And what would we prefer to leave be?

We have to ask these questions very emphatically and endure them within ourselves; endure the unpleasantness, the madness, the doubt, the seduction, the insincerity, and the ignorance. Of course, we also have to struggle to answer them – behind the scenes, on the stage – and Entering relationships. Because the forced break and what it teaches us will not automatically lead to a "better world." Theatre director Thomas Ostermeier recently spoke here of "corona kitsch from the well-off circles." He calls such thinking ahistoric and fears instead that social antagonisms will intensify.

Let's go a little further. We're in great danger of growing too apathetic to ask and endure real questions and of being drawn even more into the quagmire of everyday and relationship simulations. So the "stress test" we are now under at best shows where we reacted strongly, but also where things are (or will be) in a sorry state. We've been caught off guard many times and can see how quickly change can happen under duress. Again: We first need to perceive such positions and try less to understand them. That way we create a starting point for more truthful and thus more lasting steps towards transformation and might lend new wings to ongoing processes.

What we already knew and felt...

Finally, we should take a look at the practice of transformation because the pathway would in no way start from scratch. We already know what changes are necessary; many approaches have long been formulated and permanent discourse spaces are being considered for the development of new formats. For example, let's look at all the efforts towards increased participation, third spaces, towards creating digital/analog strategies, or the re-politicisation of cultural work, or the demand for distinct positions. Or let's put all the results of the countless cultural development plans of the past few years side by side.

What we often lacked, however, was the necessary momentum, the right climate, and the tenacity to implement far-reaching (transformation) measures. As tragic as it may be, the coronavirus pandemic shows us that we will not be able to return to the "old normal" even if many will attempt to do so. We can foresee how the pandemic will impact the cultural sector financially and structurally and how, above all, many private and non-profit stakeholders will not be able to stay afloat for long. The longer closures or drastic restrictions cut off or severely limit contact with the

audience, the more difficult it will be to keep in touch. The virus is also acting as a filter here that makes long-known failures and flaws ruthlessly visible.

What now? On the one hand, there is already an increasingly articulated need for far-reaching concepts for dealing with both familiar challenges and those accelerated by the pandemic. On the other hand, there is an increasing need for collaboration, for establishing true relationships. Even before the coronavirus crisis, it had become apparent for years that the majority of transformational steps could not be accomplished without partnerships. When Düsseldorf's private theatres propose playing in the Schauspielhaus and the opera when the buildings are not in use (because the new constraints mean they can only perform at a loss in their own sites) then perhaps this heralds a new era of entering relationships. Then, in addition to aid funds, we need more supportive and coordinating structures to promote network building in the cultural sector. Then the manifold demands for turning tomorrow's cultural administrations into coordination nodes must finally be met. Then the many cultural plans of recent years will take on a whole new meaning. And those that are now being written can take a closer look at this topic.

How do we want to live (together)?

The time has therefore come for the artists, the cultural creators, and the cultural enablers to step out of their silos and breathe life into the demand for a cultural policy that is also a social policy. The time has come for bold narratives and their fulfilment. The time has come to meet the need for places of communication and social interaction, a need that has been growing for years and been accelerated by "distancing." It is time to ask and endure the question "How do we want to live together?" (the narrative from the 2019 cultural concept of the city of Kassel) and what roles art and culture want and can play in it.

Dr Patrick S. Föhl, Berlin
director of Netzwerk Kulturberatung, Berlin

Suse Klemm, Berlin
owner of the practice Seelenklima, Berlin