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A column on the Fourth World Summit on Arts and Culture by Mike van Graan, Programme Director of the Summit.

For further information about the World Summit and the speeches presented at the event, Got o www.artsummit.org

One of the key themes to emerge at the World Summit on Arts and Culture, the first to be held in Africa, is that we live in a world characterised by enormous structural inequities in the distribution of, and access to resources, with extreme wealth on the one hand and abject poverty on the other. This global phenomenon is reflected further in regions and within countries. The inevitable conflicts that arise out of the struggle for resources and power, play themselves out in the cultural arena, or take on a cultural dimension with culture being appropriated as a mobilising force within that struggle. Culture is then both the site and the means of struggle, with the arts and the media – with their embedded worldviews, values, beliefs and ideas – reinforcing or challenging dominant cultural – and power positions.

Against this background, the World Summit reminded delegates of a few contradictions or paradoxes that need to be grappled with, or at least to be held in mind:

1. Whether cultural hegemony is asserted through force – as in the case of the Taliban publicly burning books or obliging women to dress in a certain way on pain of punishment - or through market forces dominated by major international or regional economies, the intention (or effect) in terms of homogenising values, worldviews, ideas and beliefs are similar.
2. Cultural diversity has in recent times been promoted as an antidote to such homogenisation, and yet, cultural diversity can be both an affirming assertion of self-respect and dignity and the premise – or tool - for conflict between nations, communities and people.
3. Within the context of material inequities and its concomitant skewed power relations, culture, the arts and cultural exchange (often with the wealthier nations or communities providing the primary resources for such collaboration) can often be strategies for co-option to maintain the status quo, or, more rarely, the means for resistance and change

If these assertions are true, then whether it is recognised or not, the individual artist and her work takes place in an ongoing struggle for hegemony, for upholding or challenging dominant values, ideas, beliefs and social patterns of behaviour, so that the arts are never neutral. As one of the keynote speakers reminded us after showing us a moving, powerful Clip from a movie, *The Tour*, “there are no innocent songs.”

For policy-makers in arts and culture, and for those distributing public funding, particularly when such funding – whether overtly or implicitly – is expected to align itself with national interests, the allocation of funding has never been, and can never be simply about “supporting the arts”, for the allocation and use of funding occurs within the context of structural inequities in economic and political power, and against the background of cultural struggles that are symptomatic of the tensions caused by such inequities.

In the build-up to the World Summit, the local National Arts Council hosted a series of discussions for South African artists to engage with a few of the Summit themes beforehand. At one of these, a speaker suggested that the NAC should support a festival by Mozambican artists so that South Africans would be able to learn more about our neighbours, and so perhaps reduce the acts of xenophobic violence towards them, a form of “intercultural dialogue” if you like. This sparked huge debate about whether “our” (South African) money should be used for “other” artists, even if they were resident in “our” country, and even if much of “our” money came from the increasing penetration of “our” companies into the markets of “their” countries of origin.

On the other hand, public funding agencies in Europe and elsewhere make funding available particularly for migrant communities, in order to assimilate them into the dominant culture, precisely to reduce any threat – whether by terror or other means - to the way of life of their respective societies.

Given the huge structural inequities in our world and the almost inevitable conflicts which they do and will spawn, do we simply resign ourselves towards the looming national, regional or global Armageddons? As those engaged in the arts, it is our lot to dwell within that Gramscian paradox: the pessimism of the intellect versus the optimism of the will. With our rational senses we are able to analyse and reflect and this may give rise to pessimism because of the intractability of the structural problems that lay at the root of our conflicts. Yet, it is in acting to change that world, starting perhaps with little steps, and at a local, micro level, that we reflect our optimism.

And so it is with this fourth World Summit on Arts and Culture, the first to be held in Africa, a continent which for many has been a symbol of pessimism. For of the 179 countries ranked on the Human Development Index, 27 of the bottom 29, are on the African continent. While the world average life expectancy is 66 years, in Africa, only 9 countries – out of 53 – enjoy a life expectancy of 50 or more. Even in this, the miracle, rainbow nation that gave the world so much hope, since the victory over apartheid, life expectancy has declined significantly, the gap between rich and poor has grown to one of the widest in the world, and almost as many people survive on government handouts as are formally employed. Which is why, for me, hosting the World Summit in Africa with these and other resource, a logistical and organizational challenge was, and is an act of optimism.

Often, South Africa wins bids to host international events on the back of these events supposedly benefitting the rest of Africa. Usually though, it is South Africa that benefits most and often, after the bid has been won, our African counterparts are forgotten.

But I am delighted that this World Summit – not least because of the partnership with the Arterial Network - has already provided opportunities for Africans generally in that

- a. there are at least 100 delegates from 30 African countries north of the Limpopo here, comprising more than 20% of the total number of delegates
- b. of the 57 invited speakers, more than 40% are Africans, with the Summit being a platform to project African thought and perspectives into the global arena (ironically, the only invited speaker who did not make the Summit was an African who could not get a South African visa in time).
- c. the opening production – 3 Colours – included music, language and artists from other African countries so that it was an African rather South African production, a collaboration across national boundaries and narrow, nationalistic egos and self-interests

South Africa might be the only country in Africa with the resources to be able to host the FIFA World Cup at the moment, but our football team is ranked lower than 13 other teams on the continent.

For me, this is a two-fold metaphor appropriate to the World Summit and its key themes of global inequities and cultural diversity.

1. simply because countries have less – even significantly less - resources than other countries, does not mean that they cannot be competitive in the realms of ideas, values, beliefs: in such contexts, talent, imagination and sheer will could count for more and
2. most of the Summit speakers have purposely been selected from countries that are not part of the “mainstream”, that are not usually represented in the international conference circuit; I believe that this diversity of speakers, with many being from the underside of contemporary history, has contributed in no small degree to the quality, richness and freshness of the discourse over the last few days.

A few years ago, I participated in a BBC programme that focused on languages that had historically bad reputations – German because of the holocaust and Afrikaans because of apartheid. A simple but clear insight struck me during the making of that programme, that it is not language that oppresses but people who use the language. And so it is with culture; it is not culture that oppresses or that engages in conflict, but people who subscribe to and appropriate particular cultures for whatever ends. And people - whether they speak English or French, Afrikaans or Zulu, Hebrew or Arabic, Swahili or any other language - are capable of tremendous acts of kindness, generosity and humanity, but also of unspeakable atrocities.

In the final analysis, this Summit is not about culture, or the arts, but about people, people from very different countries, cultures, contexts; people making connections across language, gender, resource and cultural divides. And out of these connections, new partnerships will emerge, new projects catalysed. It would be good if we could find a way to register and monitor the progress and effect of the projects and/or connections made

during the last few days for the Summit is not an end in itself, but part of a continuum of international dialogue and perhaps the initiator of new discussions, projects and partnerships.

In closing and on a personal note, I would like to thank IFACCA and the NAC for the privilege of curating the programme for this fourth World Summit on Arts and Culture. It has been an absolute honour to do this.

Mike van Graan