

“Art which is used as a means to an end loses its sharp edges”

Chris Keulemans on SICA's Café Méditerranée

by Jos Schuring

The eleven meetings of cultural talent from the Middle-East that have taken place so far in SICA's Café Méditerranée have seen many inspirational guests. Panel chairman Chris Keulemans is keen to tell about his heroes, and has a clear opinion of the value of cultural exchange.



Chris Keulemans, photo: Maarten van Haaff

Cultural exchange can generally count on a sympathetic reception in artistic circles although this is mainly dictated by pragmatism. “Exchange is an idea of policy makers. It’s not something that artists are occupied with at all. For them, working internationally is perfectly normal. If a Turkish Romanian in Amsterdam is looking for a saxophone player and a Finnish person shows up and there is a click, then the band is happy and it’s completely irrelevant that he comes from Finland. If you’re organising a dance festival in Beirut then of course you want to have groups from Europe or North America on your programme. Cultural exchange is primarily something for institutions and then governments get involved, and before you know it you’re mixed up in a political agenda. And this is sometimes diametrically opposed to the desires of the artist, because he couldn’t care less about improved trade relations between different countries. So the series of meetings in the Café Méditerranée primarily provide a stage for artists and not for institutions.”



Café Méditerranée, photo: Maarten van Haaff

Impressively matter-of-fact

Is cultural exchange a suitable medium for improving international relations? "It may be, but not necessarily. In the last five years or so cultural diplomacy has become a more established means of softening or addressing certain issues, where the actual art itself plays a supporting role. This does not have to be a bad thing. Here in the Netherlands we have grown up with the idea that politicians should keep their hands off artistic content, although this is starting to change. The disadvantage is of course that then you only judge art on its social function and not on its intrinsic qualities. Film can give a useful insight into other cultures. Music can bind people together. You can use theatre to spread public information about women's rights or AIDS. And there's nothing wrong with that as such, but it doesn't take account of the dark, destructive side of art which also exists. Art which is used as a means to an end loses its sharp edges. But in Café Méditerranée a large number of artists have been featured who are able to rise above this. Someone like Jack Persekian has so much experience that he is not likely to be tamed by policy, but rather to turn it to his advantage. Persekian is an American-Armenian-Israeli Arab who is the founder of the Al-Ma'mal Gallery in East Jerusalem. He is also the artistic director of the Sharjah Biennial, near Dubai. The district where the Al-Ma'mal Gallery is situated is not the sort of place where you'd expect to find a flourishing arts centre, but the gallery exudes great quality and life. A man like Persekian makes grateful use of the opportunities offered by funds and museums and has a healthy working relationship with the Van Abbe Museum. Persekian is a cheerful man who takes a matter-of-fact view of the setbacks he experiences daily in East Jerusalem. This makes him an impressive personality. The Townhouse Gallery in Cairo is an equally impressive place, tucked away in a district packed to overflowing with shops selling second-hand car parts. It's hard to get in without tripping over the piled up exhausts. The artists and mechanics are all mixed together, resulting in a natural merging of two totally different worlds."



Jack Persekian

Tangible results

During the Dancing on the Edge Festival it was easy to see that cultural exchange leads to inspiration. By now this festival featuring dance from the Middle-East has taken place twice in various towns and cities in the Netherlands. Keulemans is enthusiastic. "Even after only two editions, Dancing on the Edge has established itself as a major crossroads of interesting encounters. It has discovered a real gap in the market. Dance is not an established art form as such in the Middle-East, and this of course has its consequences. A production by Feri de Geus and Noortje Bijvoets featured five young Palestinian dancers. It was a truly sparkling performance. The way in which these youngsters were able to portray the Palestinian abandoned-home feeling was supremely moving. De Geus and Bijvoets created a clip-style performance in which the Palestinians could demonstrate their own language of movement to great effect. The dancers gave workshops at twelve secondary schools and had everyone's undivided attention."

Keulemans thinks it only logical that artists are so often pragmatic. "Artists get funding because we have problems with Muslims. That's just the way it is. Some people are well aware of this. And you can hardly blame them. This can be tricky for policy makers, because funds don't go looking for artists who

are good at rustling up subsidies, but people who make interesting art.” Keulemans is not particularly worried about seeing tangible results of exchange. “The Dancing on the Edge festival creates encounters between people from here and the Middle East. You can see that in the performances. But it goes further. In the schools you could see the students thinking: ‘gosh, someone from Palestine. They’re not all stone-throwers then. But isn’t an observation like this a bit of a meagre example of the benefit of cultural exchange? Keulemans is resolute: “Sometimes art reaches a lot of people, sometimes only a few. But there are very many of these small-scale initiatives and they most certainly contribute to a widening of views under Dutch people. And of course there are also the large-scale exchange projects such as the Istanbul biennials and the activities of the Prince Claus Fund.. Both have their place. Another tangible result of cultural exchange is the less rigid visa regulation in many Balkan countries. Visas are a nightmare for many artists and can complicate cultural exchange enormously.”

Provide systematic rather than incidental support

In the theme of exchange, Keulemans also has a sharp eye for culture and development, a growing policy field in which art and furthering of capacity go hand in hand. “The work of the Prince Claus Fund with its platform for intercultural exchange is of immeasurable value for the formation of Dutch views of southern cultures. The annual gala performance in the Muziekgebouw aan het IJ, for example, with its numerous dignitaries, not least of which is the royal family, is of huge importance. Particularly because they may be confronted by a bamboo architect from Colombia, an oud player from Palestine or Syrian lingerie designers. You can bet that this has an influence on policy.” For years Keulemans has been active in the field of culture and politics and he has an unspoken desire when it comes to cultural exchange. “I would like to make a plea for support given not on an incidental basis, but rather for systematic, flexible and more unconditional support for initiatives that have shown their worth. Someone like Jack Persekian should just be allowed to get on with it. Constant accountability may not always be necessary. In actual fact, a large-scale gala from a fund with many leading citizens and something like the Café Méditerranée is also quite remarkable. It costs a great deal of money and you have to justify yourself as an institute by using such events to increase your visibility. I realise that this is necessary, but sometimes it troubles me and I do sympathise with such institutions. I think it is much more important that there is support for art in the Middle East than that an article appears in the newspaper here.” Keulemans is often inspired by encounters. “People who are able to clearly communicate a vision can generate great public enthusiasm. In my opinion the most impressive man in Café Méditerranée was **Ismail Sjeich Hassan**, an architect and urban developer from the Palestinian refugee camp Nahr-el-Bared in Lebanon. When the refugee camp was destroyed by bombing and many people fled, he tracked down the inhabitants. He asked them ‘where do you live now, who are your neighbours, have you got a map’? Later he used this information to build a new camp together with these people.



Sjeich Hassan is my biggest hero. People like these get things going. Of course you can counter this by saying that he is only one individual person. But don’t forget that there are very many such individuals. It is really quite something that SICA/ Café Méditerranée recognises the value of this. Together with the large-scale projects I already mentioned, you can see that here in the Netherlands we are not performing too badly on the world stage in this field.”

Café Méditerranée meetings are a series in which SICA Dutch Centre for International Cultural Activities invites leading professionals from the cultural field in the Middle East and North Africa to analyse and discuss cultural topics. For more information please visit www.dare2connect.nl