

# MAKING NOTHING HAPPEN: ART AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN TROUBLED TIMES

---

Francois Matarasso

TALK AT TANDEM 5<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY MEETING IN BERLIN ON 3 SEPTEMBER 2016

On the morning after Britain voted to leave the EU, the novelist [Philip Pullman tweeted](#):

‘We had a headache, so we shot our foot off.  
Now we can't walk, and we still have the headache.’

This image seemed to catch something important about the world we're living in. We face grave problems – everyone knows that – but we and, more importantly, our leaders, often seem confused about what those problems are. Without a clear understanding of the actual challenges that face us, we thrash about in pain and fear and choose bad solutions. To take one current example, it's hard to see a connection between controlling how women dress and overcoming terrorist murder, yet politicians still ban the burkini because action of some kind is symbolically necessary. In our distress and confusion, we do not respond: we react. We lash out and put a bullet in our foot.

At moments like this, it is important to remember that we have survived bad times before. I remember 1974, when industrial conflict was so bad that the British government put industry on a [three day week](#) and we spent our evenings in candlelight. I remember 1984, when NATO deployed Cruise and Pershing missiles in Europe and atomic scientists moved the [Doomsday Clock](#) forward to three minutes before midnight. I remember the [30 years of bloodshed](#) in Great Britain and Ireland that cost 3,500 lives and 50,000 injured before it ended in 1998.

I say this to put today's crises of civil war, terrorism, climate change and economic failure into context, not to minimise them. Their consequences, like the refugee crisis, are easily seen and – unhappily – easily exploited. We can all react to these terrible pressures but responding to them in a way that might make a difference – that requires more thought, more empathy, more imagination. It requires, I might say, more creativity.

---

Matarasso, F., 2016, Making Nothing Happen: Art and Civil Society in Troubled Times v.1 (09/16). This talk was given on 3 September 2016 at the Tandem meeting in Berlin. © 2016 François Matarasso: this work is distributed under the [Creative Commons](#) Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence. You are free to copy, distribute, or display the digital version on condition that: you attribute the work to the author; the work is not used for commercial purposes; and you do not alter, transform, or add to it. <http://arestlessart.com>

The main difference between today's crises and those of the world in which I grew up is complexity. Then the binary opposition of capitalism and communism, and the limited information we had about the world, made everything seem much simpler. It was possible to ask – as both politicians and artists often did, though not always expecting the same answer – 'which side are you on?'. That is much more difficult in today's multipolar, fractured, networked, unstable world, saturated as it is by undifferentiated information. Paradoxically, that complexity seems to increase the attractions of simplicity. How many leaders see themselves as contemporary Alexanders slicing through the frustrating intricacies of the Gordian Knot? The Brexit referendum was just such a reaction. It reduced complex questions about the future of British society to a binary choice.

You probably didn't expect to start the day with such debatable historical reflections. Perhaps you wonder what they have to do with the Tandem programme. Let me beg your patience a little longer while I explain.

The crises faced by Europe and its neighbours cannot be set aside while we consider the value of [a cultural programme like Tandem](#). They are at the heart of why Tandem exists and why it is worth sustaining and indeed developing. Tandem is a small programme with large ambitions. It aims to connect civil society in the European Union and in neighbouring regions, especially Eastern Europe, Turkey, the Middle East and North Africa. In doing this Tandem implicitly – and often explicitly – supports the founding values of European unity: human rights, democracy, the rule of law, tolerance and respect for diversity. Indeed, as I have seen from my contact with those involved, Tandem does more than support those values: it works hard to enact them daily.

I do not describe these as 'European' values to suggest that they belong to European culture in any proprietorial sense. They are universal ideas. They are defended by some people everywhere, if not by all people anywhere. But Europeans, in the brave and difficult process of uniting their own continent in response – not reaction – to genocidal wars, have politically and constitutionally committed themselves to these values. We Europeans challenge ourselves – and invite others to test us – against these standards. That we often fail to meet them is not a reason to give up the challenge, as I fear some may take Brexit to mean. It is a reason to carry on, to try harder. In one of his last texts, Samuel Beckett wrote:

'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'<sup>1</sup>

Tandem has its part to play in that. It has firmly chosen its side – the side of human rights, democracy, the rule of law, tolerance and respect for diversity. Very well, you might say, admirable indeed, but how, actually, does a cultural programme turn these abstract ideals into something that actually makes a difference in the world? How can the work of artists and cultural actors promote, say, tolerance when powerful forces are set on dividing us?

Tandem's response to a complex question is, as it must be, complex. But it is rooted in a simple idea: that citizens, with the supportive organisation of civil society, can encounter each other in public spaces through the mediation of art and culture. That through creating

and sharing artistic work rooted in their own experience, they can understand one another better. That in finding common ground in the emotional, intellectual and symbolic space of art they can work towards mutually respectful ways of living together. Tandem – which places intercultural dialogue at the very heart of everything it does – offers interaction as an alternative to confrontation. It offers curiosity not certainty, discovery not retrenchment, hope, not hate.

Even to listeners who know Tandem and whose energies are spent in cultural action, that must sound like a list of well-meaning abstractions, if not platitudes. So let me give you some examples to illustrate how community-based artistic action can defend a space for tolerant exchange in response to the difficulties that face us today. I've chosen projects from outside the Tandem programme, to introduce you to experiences you may not know, but I have included one Tandem project to show the continuity of all this work

- [Entelechy Arts](#) is a small organisation based in South London, which works with people who have multiple disabilities and the old. For some years they have been working with the social services department to reimagine what a day facility for the elderly could be if it was structured around creative activity. Meet Me At The Albany happens every Wednesday and is open to anyone over 60. Those who come they may find themselves exploring theatre, circus, poetry or music and making new friends in a diverse community. The project has produced an extraordinary artwork called 'Bed', in which three elderly people lie in their night clothes in specially designed beds on ordinary shopping streets. One performer is silent, but a story can be heard echoing through her bedframe. The others speak about their fictionalised lives to anyone who talks to them. This is powerful, challenging theatre that often produces strong feelings in the people who stop. In using theatre to bring some of our loneliest and most vulnerable fellow-citizens into the centre of urban life, 'Bed' makes transformative connections between people.
- [Chapitô](#) is a circus school founded some 30 years by the Portuguese clown, Teresa Ricou, known professionally as Teté. From workshops for local children in her garden, it has grown to be a major social enterprise with 120 young students in a former women's prison near Lisbon castle. Some of its funds come from the Education Ministry as it is an accredited senior school for 16 to 18 year olds. The rest is raised through a performing company, commercial contracts and a prestigious restaurant on the site. There is also a nursery and a shop for home-made products. The pupils come from wealthy families, but also from the poorest; they include young people involved with the criminal justice system, migrants and refugees. All these people – privileged teenagers and single mothers, street kids, students and tourists – mix in a project that makes no distinctions between them. And Chapitô's theatre and circus work is so good that many young people find jobs and careers. Its [own social economy](#), linking art, justice and education, now employs about a hundred people.
- [Men & Girls Dance](#) is a project by Fevered Sleep which sets out to reclaim the rights of adults and children to be together, to play together and to dance together. The project

has visited four cities so far, creating new work each time. There are three elements to it: a dance performance with five men and nine local girls selected through open recruitment; a talking space open to the public in which people are invited to discuss their feelings about the project; and a free newspaper distributed to audience, visitors and passers-by. At a time of intense and well-founded concern about the sexual abuse of children, this is a brave and political work that invites us to face important feelings, ideas and experiences. There is enormous potential for it to go wrong: it takes artists of great sensitivity to defend a space for human innocence in such a climate.

- [Blue Talk](#) was a 2015 theatre project which took place in Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina. Conceived by ERGStatus in Belgrade, it brought together theatre artists, psychologists and people with mental health problems in a series of week-long collaborations leading to public performances. The experience was very important for many of those involved and it has led to new work in partner organisations. But the seven performances also reached large audiences, through TV and radio broadcasts, press coverage and online. In doing so, Blue Talk brought post-war mental health issues into a mainstream debate, while celebrating people with mental ill-health as equal members of society who can create moving artistic performances.
- Finally, a Tandem project: [Lampedusa Mirrors](#), which I've chosen because it directly addressed what may be the most urgent and contested challenge facing us today: the refugee crisis. Over a year, artists from Ecllosion d'Artistes in Tunis and Teatro dell'Argine in Bologna, worked together to understand and give artistic form to the experience of people on both sides of the Mediterranean who are caught up in this large scale migration. In their exchange visits they began by sharing experiences to develop a common pool of practice and ideas before opening up the project to young people from Tunis and Bologna. A piece evolved that was performed several times in Tunis and Bologna, opening up a space for debate and sharing between participants and the public. A documentary film has also taken the story to many more people through screenings 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 festival](#) and will be shown at [BOZAR in Brussels](#) during a season about migration in September 2016.

What do these projects have in common? On the surface, they seem very different: different countries, different cultures, different art forms, different aims. But look more closely and there is much common ground.

First, they are all initiated by artists who want to speak to – and work with – the society of which they are part. Unlike some parts of the art world, they look outwards at the things that matter most to friends, neighbours and strangers. These artists are more interested in other people than themselves.

Secondly, the artists are prepared to look at difficult, ugly, painful experiences: youth prisons, loneliness in old age, post-war mental health issues, the sexualisation of innocence,

refugees, migration, death. This is the landscape of our uncomfortable problems, the issues that provoke reactions when we need responses. The creative projects I've described bring them into the open and encourage us to feel, think and reason in responding to these experiences.

Thirdly, these artworks happen where different classes and cultures cross. They encourage people to stop and notice one another; to meet; to talk and to listen. The art is not confined to what happens on stage or even in the street: it is developed in conversations and exchanges that can even lead to new iterations and changes to the art work itself.

Fourthly, these projects are dismantling the idea that art is separate from the rest of society and that artists themselves are different from the rest of us. In these projects everyone is an artist, not by training or status, but through their actions. Art is special because it allows us to do and express and understand things that we cannot access in any other way. But that specialness does not need protecting from the difficulties of life – it is a gift to be offered to all who are struggling with those difficulties.

Finally, these artists do not think they have answers to difficult human experiences. They recognise the individuality and value of each person. They may not untangle the Gordian knots they explore, but nor do they impatiently slash through them. They sense that exploration may be the point and that if we can see life more clearly, we might respond to it better. Art is an antidote to political slogans and dangerous simplicities. It makes things more complex, not less. It helps us see things from other points of view. It slows us down and makes us enjoy taking our time.

With time we – especially those committed to the Tandem idea – can remember why Europe committed itself to human rights, democracy, the rule of law, tolerance and respect for diversity. With time, we can ask how to put Tandem's resources – education, creativity, internationalism, youth, optimism, skills, contacts, confidence – in the service of those values, to support people involved in enacting them in communities. With time and care, we work for values but with people; we work with hope, not certainty; we listen more than we speak; we neither abandon our beliefs nor impose them. With time we find friends and allies, we build partnerships, not heaven on earth.

That is how a small cultural exchange programme can hope to make a difference to the big challenges that face Europeans and their neighbours today. And in the past five years, some 300 individuals have made that step, opening their organisations up to the neighbours, close at hand and in distant lands, in search of friendship, creativity and artistic experience. It is not just that hundreds of workshops, performances, films and exhibitions have been created or that tens of thousands of people have experienced the artistic work they offered. The key thing is that in doing that work, in reaching out to others unlike and yet so like themselves, each Tandem partnership has helped bring European values to life. The challenge for Tandem now – in this time of so many dangers – is to capitalise on what has been done in the first five years. You have tested the idea and shown that it works. You have

found thousands of creative people who want to work together to overcome the divisions in our shared living space – and who knows how many more wait to be found. You have built a method, a process and a body of knowledge. The challenge for Tandem now – in the five years to come – is to use what you have built, to find new friends and allies, and to make a network that empowers civil society in responding to its challenges.

In one of his finest poems, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*, Auden writes famously that ‘poetry makes nothing happen’, a phrase that has often been taken as an admission of art’s essential uselessness. But there is another way of reading those words. Poetry makes nothing happen because, like all art, it is creative. It makes nothing into something: that is what creation means. The intangible, inexplicable poetry of Auden and of Yeats whom he is commemorating, did not exist before they spoke. It exists now, though they do not. They made ‘nothing’ happen. Nothing became something because of them.

It is not given to us all to write great poems. But the art that each of us can make is still valuable, because it is creative. Each Tandem partnership makes nothing happen, often in a place where too much is already happening, where hardship, violence and fear are in streets and homes. The performances, exhibitions, films and festivals that come out of those partnerships – each one an unimaginable fusion of different cultures and experiences – do not banish hardship, violence and fear. But they say ‘there is something else’. They say that ‘this is not everything’. They help us see, feel, experience something better, something hopeful, something we cannot express except in a shared experience of music or dance or images. They make nothing happen and we are stronger for it because we are reminded that there are alternatives, there are better ways of living together, there are things that matter to us all. They make nothing happen and we are stronger for it because they equip us with ideas, skills, confidence, knowledge, insight, organisation and those resources are empowering. They make nothing happen and we are stronger for it because they remind us who we are and what we have in common.

Art does not change the world. But it does change the people who change the world.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Beckett, S., 1983, *Worstword Ho*, London: John Calder, p.7