

Opening Speech

by Petra Šobáňová

Dear friends,

Let me welcome you to our conference. The idea to organise it came spontaneously in the spring of this year, when at least in the Czech Republic it seemed that the pandemic slowed down and was more or less managed – thanks to lockdown and the introduction of strict measures (including school closures) without unnecessarily large casualties. The economic and other effects of the lockdown began to be discussed, and the damage added up. The societal debate was on important topics, such as the controversial question of whether it is good to paralyse the economy and bring a significant number of people into poverty in the name of health, the importance of culture and education, and how to support these sectors. Perhaps the loudest debates, not only in our country, dealt with the issue of how the government has proceeded and whether it is able to conduct society responsibly through a period of crisis. We also thought about how easily personal freedoms were curtailed and how incredibly easy it was to close borders and return a free-spirited, fluid global public to the strict boundaries of national units. On the other hand: we were also warmed by the strong wave of solidarity between people and the countless volunteering activities of dedicated individuals and organisations, the atmosphere of mutual help and kindness towards the weaker.

Before the summer holidays, it seemed to us that Covid was defeated and that the main question was whether and how we would be able to learn from the situation. Will we be able to capitalise on our experience and, for example, introduce online communication in areas where it has not been widely used so far? Can we modernise education to take advantage of the positive effects of digitisation? Can we support teachers' digital literacy and use their motivation from this powerful experience? Can we support children from families who do not have sufficient facilities for distance learning? And finally: can we use digital tools meaningfully?

The Personal Level of the Pandemic

The pandemic was also an unprecedented experience on a personal level. Certainly, I am not alone who today perceives differently their home, life securities, intergenerational family ties. Can we cope with the wave of depression and the consequences of social isolation? Do we appreciate the value of family background and the quality of our interpersonal relationships?

Coronavirus has exposed the vulnerability of individuals, but also the vulnerability of entire societies in which today's demons, such as populism, nationalism, or the poison of misinformation, have found new breeding ground. Significantly, it turns out that populist leaders can only solve problems that they invent themselves, not real crises. Unfortunately, they fail in them and deepen the crisis by their actions. Divided societies where there is no trust cannot react rationally and suffer more in a crisis.

However, we have seen that the lockdown, specifically the suspension of the normal operation of society and the economy, had not only negative but also positive effects. Less traffic in cities, the reduction of environmental burden or – on a personal level – time spent at home with the family and living at home rather than just seeing home as a transfer station between work duties and entertainment. We have experienced that our consumerist and hedonistic lifestyles can be changed if we want to be able to shed ballast and focus on more important values.

An Opportunity to Reflect on our Immediate Experience with Pandemic

In this context, we saw our conference primarily as an opportunity to reflect on what we have experienced. We wanted to put all the key general questions into the context of our field. For a moment, it almost seemed that the topic might be slowly fading and becoming less and less relevant.

But the opposite is true. At least in the Czech Republic, the pandemic is back and much stronger. We have alarming numbers of people infected, hospitals are running out of capacity, a state of emergency has been re-declared; cultural, educational and other activities are being curtailed again. Our conference – for which we have chosen a virtual form quite deliberately – is again very topical and important not only because of its theme, but also because it allows us to try an alternative – and somewhat experimental – way of professional communication. Unfortunately, today it is one of the few platforms where we can safely meet and share our experiences.

It is certain that the spread of coronavirus has changed our lives and will continue to do so. We are faced with the challenge of dealing with this new situation and looking for ways to preserve the values of art education and to bring them to life in new conditions. In my opinion, the crisis must be taken as an opportunity. You may have seen for yourself many times during the pandemic that human creativity cannot be stopped. Papers you can get acquainted with at our conference show not only that, but much more. In particular, it is the artistic and pedagogical creativity that comes to life in crisis and shows its strength. Personally, I am enthusiastic about the pedagogical approaches that our guests present here, as well as the theoretical studies and topical research analyses that inspire new ways of thinking. The papers presented at our conference show us the way we, as teachers of art education, have managed to communicate the importance of art education and to defend it where it has been sidelined.

Let's not forget museums, galleries, and artists. Representatives of cultural institutions and artists present here how they managed to stay in touch with the audience in these changed conditions. Gallery educators show how they presented cultural heritage and art in a situation where cultural life was completely paralysed. The methods they have devised are amazing, and you will be able to see it for yourself in some workshops.

The Re-defined Role of Distance Education and Virtual Communication

Our conference papers also show that the previously rather rejected distance education and virtual communication have their place in art education and can be used without losing what is essential in

our field. The conference contributions often show the touching sensitivity of some approaches, which were not harmed by online sharing, but instead made them visible to the rest of us. To put it simply: the crisis has forced us to film, take photos, work in social networks and other online platforms, in other words, to document and share what we do with others. Now it is more than easy to present everything and show the public what is going on in art education. This is also the added value of our conference.

Coronavirus has shown us – and is still showing us – that people do not have the world under control. The effects on people's lives and health or on the economy are devastating, yet every crisis is also an opportunity to think, to transform internally and to invent new ways of living, communicating, creating, passing on the idea of art education. We have witnessed a situation where our plans and established ways of life – seemingly stable and solid – fall apart quickly. We have known how fragile our civilisation is. I believe that our conference will help us to learn from this situation and to prepare for crises that may come in the future. Let's not forget that deep experience can be an opportunity to go below the surface and find vitality and depth in uncertainty. Undoubtedly, our community within InSEA can be the fulcrum on which we can rely in the future. In crisis, it is extremely important to be in a community, to be anchored in a supportive network of related people, to have 'our own' people around us, and to be able to share everything that is happening, uncertainties, fears, but also good, new ideas, the joy from success or from discovering something new.

The current pandemic is so devastating for us also because it takes away or limits the possibility of this natural sharing. It forces us to isolate ourselves. It disrupts our contacts with people, whether it is usual family and friendly encounters or participation in cultural life – at openings, concerts, theater performances.

Perhaps our virtual meeting – beyond all its limits – will become a much-needed support network and opportunity for people-to-people contact. I believe it will offer to all of us inspiration, strength and the joy of communicating with each other – wherever we are on the globe. It is my wish for all of us to share with each other all the good and bad that the current situation brings to us, and to make new friendships.