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Riverside Showcase 2019 | Interview



As part of the media partnership between [culture360.ASEF.org](#) and XTRAX, we interviewed Maggie Clarke, Director of XTRAX and Irene Segura, International Relations and Artist Development of XTRAX, to tell us more about the XTRAX showcase at the Stockton International Riverside Festival that took place earlier in August.

How did the [XTRAX](#)/Stockton International Riverside Showcase 2019 go? What makes it unique from other festivals in the United Kingdom and other international festivals?

The XTRAX/Stockton International Riverside Festival Showcase (SIRF) 2019 was a highly successful event for outdoor professionals, welcoming 141 delegates from the United Kingdom (UK) as well as Belgium, France, Spain, Hungary, Netherlands, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Hong Kong, Singapore, China, South Korea and Japan. Aside from exposing our delegates to an extensive programme of shows, the professional activity delivered supported artists, presenters and other industry professionals to expand their networks and gain a better knowledge of the outdoor arts panorama, both at a local as well as at an international level.

Having just delivered its 32nd edition, the Stockton International Riverside Festival is one of the world's oldest, free festival of performing arts in the public space in the UK. Its reputation as one of the best outdoor festivals in Europe has been cemented over years of presenting some of the most iconic UK and international companies to audiences in the thousands.

One of the key elements that distinguishes SIRF from other festivals is the volume of artists and companies that are showcased over three days, as well as its commitment to highlighting the best of UK outdoor work. Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight the importance of free arts events taking place in Stockton and the investment in culture that is being made in the region, especially bearing in mind that Stockton is among the 20% most deprived areas in the country.



Photos from the Stockton International Riverside Festival 2019, featuring Newtons Ladder – Sirin

(Photo Credits: Stockton Borough Council)

The UK XTRAX showcases typically take place in the context of an existing and established outdoor arts festival in England, which is a rather interesting model. Why have you chosen to present your showcases alongside such festivals and how has this format worked for XTRAX in the past 18 years?

Since 2001 and in developing specialist experience of showcases, XTRAX staff have travelled widely to explore several models of delivery, attending or making presentations at some of the world's most successful events. This extensive field research as well as practical experience of delivery of both indoor and outdoor events has given the XTRAX team a comprehensive overview of different showcase models and has informed the current *modus operandi*.

Unlike indoor work, which can be presented in isolation from a public facing event, the costs and logistics associated with presenting outdoor work of any scale is such that it is impractical to present such work to an audience of only professionals. Additionally, another difference with venue-based work is that a substantial number of outdoor shows rely on audience interaction.



Photos from the Stockton International Riverside Festival 2019, featuring Mimbres – Lifted
(Photo Credits: Stockton Borough Council)

Given these considerations, the most effective model for showcasing outdoor work is in the context of a public facing festival. Just as Edinburgh, Brighton, Avignon and Manchester Festivals are a magnet for international professionals, for outdoor work there are festivals around the world that have become flagships for outdoor professionals to attend, given the programme presented and the facilitation around professional activity.

All XTRAX's showcase work stems from forging the right partnerships, and we work very closely with key festivals in order to ensure that our priorities and aims are shared. Our showcase work ensures that UK outdoor arts has a place in the international map, and for that reason, it is crucial to bring international delegates to some of the best British festivals who will present innovative and high-quality UK outdoor work.

XTRAX presented a panel discussion focusing on the outdoor arts sector in East Asian countries, during the festival. Have you noticed any shifts in the conversations and trends surrounding the outdoor arts scene over the past few years? What are some of the challenges you face working in the outdoor arts sector? Any differences between the experiences in Europe and Asia?

Having speakers from Singapore, Hong Kong, China, Japan and South Korea on the panel was incredibly valuable and certainly broadened our perspectives and understanding of the outdoor arts sector in these countries.

As expected with such a diverse representation, there are palpable differences in several areas including; the meaning of 'outdoor arts or street arts' (or indeed if it is considered an art form as such); the rules and regulations that define the use and ownership of public space and therefore determine what can and cannot happen in that arena; the climate and geography of the space; the existing financial support and the artistic interest in the field (with its set of possibilities and limitations).



Photos from the East Asian Outdoor Arts Panel Discussion

Having said that, there seems to be a common understanding of the importance and impact of placing shows in the public space throughout all our representatives. As a result, this field seems to be growing exponentially in East Asia, attracting artists, presenters and key stakeholders alike. South Korea is at the forefront of outdoor arts in East Asia, where the ecology of the sector is sustained by a respectable number of new and established festivals as well as an impressive infrastructure, support organisations, membership associations and marketplaces, who all contribute to the development of outdoor arts.

As compared to South Korea, the other mentioned countries can be perceived as being at a much earlier stage in terms of the development of outdoor arts as a sector. I would however argue that they are simply different models, growing in their own way. There is certainly a noticeable evolutionary trend that is evidenced by the emergence of multiple smaller-scale festivals and events presenting various formats of performance in the public space on a regular basis.

Placing shows in the public space means being exposed to a level of unpredictability, and that is shared across the board, regardless of where these events take place. Furthermore, there is still a perception of outdoor arts being a 'lesser artform', and although this is slowly improving, it is a common challenge that lobbying networks such as [Circostrada](#) are crucial for.

A commonality between both regions is using the outdoors as a space for activism and protest through artistic expressions, which is something that we have witnessed in Europe as well as in Asia, with more recent examples emerging from the Hong Kong protests.

With many other challenges, the outdoor sector also presents an infinity of possibilities, namely being able to reach audiences that would otherwise not be exposed to the arts, and this democratised access to the arts is behind several organisations' priorities.



Audiences at the East Asian Outdoor Arts Panel Discussion

Working internationally is at the core of the work of XTRAX, could you share a little more on how you deal with international partnerships?

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XTRAX is highly respected internationally for its knowledge of the Outdoor Arts sector, its extensive showcase experience, producer expertise and international connections. For the second time and after a successful project running 2015 to 2018, we are delivering [Platform 4:UK](#), an Arts Council of England funded project to support the export and international promotion of UK Outdoor Arts.

As an established showcase organiser and a founder, partner and manager of [Without Walls](#) (now with 30+ UK festivals), many international festivals recognise XTRAX as a gateway into the UK or European sector. This organisational reputation enables XTRAX to negotiate valuable reciprocal relationships, which we have been developing since 2015 and will continue with our second cycle of the Platform 4:UK programme.

Our international work is deeply rooted in partnership-building. Identifying the interests and needs of each partner, understanding their context and paving the way for coherent, mutually beneficial exchanges is at the core of our work. Relationships develop over time, and a lot of our partnerships come to fruition over a number of years.

One of the models that we have successfully developed is based on the concept of reciprocity, where we are able to create opportunities in both countries involved in the collaboration. A successful example of this is the relationship XTRAX has nurtured with partners in South Korea, where XTRAX has delivered several exchange projects, including a UK programme in Seoul Street Arts Festival in 2017, reciprocated with a Korean Spotlight programme in Greenwich + Docklands International Festival 2017. As an organisation, we build trust with our partners and are often asked to curate and recommend programmes of outdoor work alongside our international partners.



Photo after the end of the East Asian Outdoor Arts Panel Discussion

Finally, the XTRAX workforce is hugely international, with Catalan, Spanish, Italian, French, German and English being spoken fluently in the office. This is key when working internationally, as not only does it facilitate communications, but it also brings a breadth of knowledge around particular cultural contexts.

What are some of your upcoming plans for XTRAX?

Having delivered two UK showcases and one UK Focus in the Netherlands as well as hosting a stand at Fira Tàrraga, the biggest marketplace for outdoor arts in Europe, our plans for Platform 4:UK (2019-2021) are well underway.

In 2020 and 2021, we will continue to support international promoters to see the work of British artists as part of showcase events and visitor programmes at selected festivals in the UK, as well as encouraging international festivals to present UK artists overseas. These activities will be accompanied by a range of professional events, pitch sessions, panel discussions and networking opportunities to facilitate information exchange between UK and international artists, promoters and sector professionals.

A strong list of international partners will work with us to deliver this next stage of the project, including key partners in Europe and further afield, with a special focus on developing relationships in Asia. We will explore exchange and residency programmes between UK and international partners as well as a programme of professional development activities for artists and outdoor arts professionals.

Given the uncertainties that Brexit poses for the sector, we will continue to advocate for UK outdoor artists, create opportunities to respond to this threat and deliver information-sharing sessions with our UK and international colleagues.

XTRAX staff will continue to travel extensively, attending key events in the UK, Europe and Asia.

Our most immediate next steps are continuing to develop our work in East Asia through attending Seoul Street Arts Festival as well as hosting a stand and pitching during PAMS, the Performing Arts Market in Seoul, South Korea.

***Maggie Clarke** (Director of XTRAX) set up XTRAX in 2001 as an arts development and event delivery organisation, and it is now one of the leading outdoor arts and events organisations in the UK. XTRAX has run numerous showcases to promote UK artists to an international audience, as well as supported the development of outdoor shows from diverse artists in the UK, and programmed and delivered successful festivals and events for clients including Arts Council England, Greenwich+Docklands International Festival, Mintfest, Fuse Medway Festival, Manchester City Council, Liverpool City Council to name a few. Maggie is the producer of the large-scale outdoor show *As The World Tipped* by Wired Aerial Theatre, Directed by Nigel Jamieson, and is a founder member of the Without Walls consortium, a partnership of outdoor festivals that has commissioned and supported more than 100 new projects by UK artists.*

***Irene Segura** (International Relations and Artist Development of XTRAX), originally left her hometown of Barcelona to train as a dancer (BA Hons Dance Theatre, University of the Arts, London), which she then combined with Arts Management and Show Production studies. This equipped her to further her career by working in the production and touring of site-specific projects and outdoor festivals both in Spain and internationally, while at the same time managing and delivering cultural, corporate and academic events and writing for the dance magazine *Por la Danza*. Irene started working at XTRAX in November 2016, and since then she has contributed to the management and delivery of XTRAX’s international projects, lead on several Without Walls projects as well as assisted with the production and touring of Wired Aerial Theatre’s creations.*

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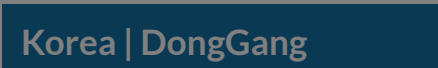
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