

**Speech by Michael Svennevig
at the Immart Artist Dinner,
Friday on the 2.nd of February 2018
at the Global Art Gallery in Vanløse**

Really, it's just about making friends. Here tonight and all over the world. Everything can be brought down to this very simple and basic fact.

Nicol has asked me to tell about the festivals I do. I'll do it gladly - and thanks in the first to ask me to contribute in this way, Nicol.

I guess we all make the world bigger and richer when we make friends. It gives new color to life. And we need colors. It broadens our perspective and makes our view bigger. It's the very same idea behind the festivals. It all started 10 years ago. And it all started with a friendship.

At the time I was on the board of Danish PEN (an organization of writers and journalists dealing mainly with freedom of speech) and we were contacted by a young 29 years old refugee seeker from Kurdish Iraq. He was a poet, and have been in Danish camps (- sorry, refugee centers) - for almost 10 years. I met with him and we made an evening at the Danish Writers Association, where he read his poems aloud and told about his life and work. A radio-reporter afterwards said, it was great, but unfortunately something was wrong with the recording, so could we go to Sandholm and do the conversation again?

When we sat in this small room where he lived with 3 or 4 others, and they told us about how it was being a refugee seeker in a refugee camp in Denmark, I got so upset - and angry. I simply couldn't understand - and accept - that we - DENMARK - could treat people like that. I had to do - something...

I wrote a cronicle in a national newspaper (Politiken) - and a monologue based on the life of Alan Pary, which was his name. It was staged in Copenhagen (Teatret ved Sorte Hest). The national television followed Alan and the refugee seekers on the bus from Sandholm and down to the premiere. A theater critic from another national newspaper (Information) wrote a big article about it. It made the news, so to speak. Basicly the monologue was a human document, but it became very political, even without being it. And it gave me a direction and a vision for my future work - to work with human stories - and to be political - without being political.

One year after Alan was granted staying permitment – and how he has become a Danish citizen. Actually I invited him to join us, but since it's his 40.th year birth – today, he is excused!

Back then Alan suggested to go on hunger strike, because he was afraid to be evicted and sent back to Iraq. When he phoned and we talked about it I've just finished my lunch... and somehow the hunger strike was converted into a festival.

It was the very first festival – in 2008 in a church in Vesterbro. I'm not really religious myself, but a very warmhearted priest came to the performance at the theater and we became friends, so that's how it came about.

From the 10. th to the 19.th of August this summer it's the 10. th year anniversary of the festivals. The title is "Images of life" ("Billeder af liv"). Since the beginning it has gradually grown bigger. This year it will be held in 5 parts of Copenhagen and include 50 artists from various artistic fields – from here and abroad.

There's no budget for it – it's all made out of nothing. It's both the beauty and strength of it. As an artist I feel it makes sense to work for the greater good. Isn't that the very idea of art, that it grows to make the world a better place, because we're all in this together.

Participation and conversation are keywords. Conversation - because it'll always be during a conversation, where somebody voice a different point of view, that you get the chance to validate your own point of view - and maybe change it for something better. It's what's in between people that gives hope. I don't think we can live without hope. We breathe it. We live it – it becomes us. We are living hopes – and I believe it's important to voice our hopes, in a world where there is so much which tries to separate us and to keep us apart - and tries to make scapegoats out of all foreigners.

In my heart I believe we are all foreigners, so it's my duty to build bridges – and I hope you will join in. Because it's not done with words alone. Today we meet and share. We eat, drink and socialize. It brings hope for a better world. It's so simple.

Every year I publish a new festival book. Today I was asked to bring food, so I have. But it's another kind of food. It's food for thought. I have taken along a copy of the latest festival book to all of you. So I hope you can read Danish. Please feel free to take a copy with you, when you leave. You are even get a dedication in it, if you want.

Talking about the book. I better confess that I'm like a swamp, a human, because I listen to people and I'm curious by nature. I absorbe life stories – I write them down. I can't help it. I'm fascinated by people and what makes us into what we are. That's the reason why I organize festivals, which is about meeting people, where artists meets artists – and where

the audience can meet and hear stories about people, they might be very different from themselves but basicly just like them. By showing our differences, we realize how much alike we actually are. We look into the eyes of one another. And art is the mirror we look into in order to get a clear view of who we really are.