

REFORMATION AND REAFFIRMATION

Reflections on the crisis and renewal in European art and culture



CultureWatchEurope, Bled, Slovenia, 12 November 2011

Europe is undergoing a profound economic crisis that threatens its democracy. In a connected, interdependent world, that crisis is affected by and affects similar problems elsewhere. It takes place as the seven billionth person is born and environmental change challenges the very basis of human life.

The economic crisis is not a tsunami or an earthquake: it is man-made. Its causes lie in decisions made collectively and individually, by governments, businesses and institutions: by people.

One of its incidental results is that many of those same people are now turning away from art, culture and heritage as irrelevant to the crisis. From Amsterdam to Athens, governments slash cultural budgets in symbolic gestures of austerity of no economic importance. This rejection of culture is like starting a search for a path out of a dark forest by blowing out the candle.

Culture, which articulates our values, our dreams and fears, the best and worst of us, cannot be separated from the crisis or its causes. In affirming the central importance of culture to human thought and action, we also accept the part that cultural institutions and actors have played in shaping this situation. We accept, as cultural professionals and citizens, a shared responsibility. Culture is not, cannot be, and does not seek to be, detached from other human concerns and fields of knowledge.

This crisis requires us all to look with honesty at how we have reached this point. Artists and cultural professionals cannot contribute to the creation of a more secure, just and stable Europe without a clear understanding of where we are now, and why.

European culture – the heritage of the past and the arts of today – is like a clear Alpine lake in whose reflection we can all, if we choose, see ourselves as we are. And, like a lake, it is a constantly replenished source, not just of refreshment but of life itself.

The economic crisis we face today and the social, political and environmental challenges we may face tomorrow will not be solved by culture. But nor will they be solved without culture's resources: its expression of the deep continuity of European values, its capacity to question assumptions and imagine new solutions, its humanistic, life affirming symbols, rituals and joys, and, not least, its restorative capacities.

And yet, if we accept that culture has, in its own way, failed alongside banking, business and politics, we, actors in the field, must also accept with humility the need for change. In renewing our values and our practice we can regain the attention of European citizens, institutions and politicians. We have, now, a vital task to perform.

Some of that change is already taking place. New information and communication technology is acting on European culture today as the Reformation did on its religious life 500 years ago. In democratising the creation, distribution and critique of contemporary art it challenges established authorities. Cultural policy in Europe, and the institutions and practices it supports, must learn from the past and respond to this democratisation with courage, creativity and imagination.

But some of what we must change demands a reaffirmation of values that have shaped European culture since its earliest days, but that have been obscured by the uncertainties and misjudgements of the past decades. Community, freedom of inquiry, transcendence, humanism: from such ideas we can renew the foundations of our culture.

It is in this dual process of reformation and reaffirmation that we must find a renewal of European culture at the heart of a creative and confident European society. We must do so in the knowledge that culture is always a potential, never a given, and that its potential is not easily fulfilled without imagination, honesty and an open heart.

So we begin by reaffirming six fundamental principles of European culture on which all theory, policy and action must stand:

1. Europe needs a culture that defends fundamental human rights and democracy
2. We need culture to do the creative and imaginative work that is its unique capacity
3. We need freedom of cultural inquiry, expression and circulation
4. We need a mixed economy for public, commercial, voluntary and informal culture
5. We need investment in cultural research and development at the heart of policy
6. We need artists and cultural actors to enact the ethical responsibilities of leadership

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Fundamental principles of European art and culture

Introduction

At the Council of Europe's annual CultureWatchEurope meeting, held at Bled (Slovenia) on 11 and 12 November 2011, a small group of artists, philosophers, researchers and policy makers considered the position of European culture against the background of economic crisis and falling governments in Greece and Italy.

While there was no consensus about the meaning of the crisis, the possible contribution of cultural ideas to its causes, or the appropriate responses, participants did agree two things.

First, the crisis has deep practical, ethical and philosophical challenges for European culture and for those who work in, support and value it. Failure to respond is not acceptable: it would be an abdication of responsibility and a confession of irrelevance.

Secondly, if Europeans are to defend and renew their culture at this time, they need a simple and convincing statement of what it stands for. There is almost 3,000 years of writing about European culture: enough to fill every national library in the Union. We do not pretend to distil the work of millennia into pithy formulae: there is evidently more, infinitely more to this than can be expressed by six principles.

But the Bled participants recognised the practical use of defining, in a few clear words, some non-negotiable principles that they believe all who value Europe's culture would defend. The rationale behind the principles is set out above. This note adds some brief clarification to the principles themselves. They are a starting point, an expression of what must, on no account, be lost: there is so much more to gain.

Six fundamental principles

Europe needs a culture that defends fundamental human rights and democracy

Culture is as diverse as human societies. It is what binds us and makes us different from one another and how we express those ties and distinctions. Europe's concepts of human rights and democracy begin in the culture of Classical Greece, expressed in the theatre, poetry, art and philosophy that continue to shape us today.

Human rights and democracy have developed since then. Today, they form the foundations of European law and society through national and multinational treaties. Europe's culture – in all its changing, life-enhancing diversity – grows from the same root. Culture cannot be separated from human rights, and live. The only times our culture has let us down (or we have let it down) has been when we have forgotten that connection, most notoriously under the 20th century's totalitarian regimes.

Culture is a discourse that enables democratic expression and the negotiation of competing interests. It is democracy's lifeblood because it allows things to be said that find no place in politics. It gives voice to those on the margins and to minorities.

None of this politicises culture: that would be an assault on this and other principles here. Rather, accepting George Orwell's view that *'the opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude'*, it connects European culture to the protection of basic human rights and democracy without which there is no freedom to create culture.

We need culture to do the creative and imaginative work that is its unique capacity

Culture can connect with every part of public and private life because it influences how people go about their business. In recent years there has been a new recognition of culture's place in the economy, in social policy, education and health care, even in criminal justice, diplomacy and conflict resolution. The potential of art, heritage and other forms of cultural expression in all these fields is better understood than before. That is to be applauded and built on.

But in doing so, we must avoid subverting culture's unique capacity, to do for people what only it can do, by making it a means to another end. Culture allows human beings to define, shape and change their beliefs. It allows them to make sense of the world in ways that move them and make connections they do not control. It builds community in the true sense of the word: the shared values and beliefs of a group of people.

Culture It is a source of delight, mystery, joy, confusion, comfort and ambiguity. It works its most important effects when we trust it, simply making space for it in our lives. Only culture can do what culture does: that it why it matters.

We need freedom of cultural inquiry, expression and circulation

Culture should not be controlled by states or corporations to the extent that artists and other creative practitioners are unable to pursue their vision freely. Whether professional or amateur, artists must be able to create without interference and to share the results with others. Interference in the cultural ecology not only risks infringing people's rights but also preventing culture from achieving its best results.

This is often understood simply as a matter of freedom of expression; certainly, notorious conflicts have arisen when one artist's vision offends some people's values. But it goes further than that. Artists should feel able to explore the ideas and forms that interest them, insofar as that does not erode the human rights of others; (and there is no right not be offended.) They should be equally free to share and circulate the results, with a citizen's normal accountability for one's speech and actions.

Sometimes, this will be uncomfortable; sometimes it will offend, But anything less will place unjustifiable power into the hands of private corporations or state institutions – each with their own interests. Only by ensuring freedom of inquiry, expression and circulation can we protect democracy and our potential for creative innovation.

We need a mixed economy for public, commercial, voluntary and informal culture

Cultural diversity is not just the expression of minorities and people on the fringes of the social mainstream: it is also their protection. People who are denied a means of expression are easily denied other human and democratic rights. Cultural diversity is also vital as a resource from which new ideas, new expressions and new sensibilities can emerge. The richer the available range of culture, the greater the likelihood of innovation. Narrow, closed, restricted cultures have no future: they atrophy and die.

The cultural economy is equally diverse. It has room for blockbuster films and computer games, experimental dance and music performances, community theatre and traditional crafts, rappers, slammers and Sunday painters. Some of that cultural ecology is directly supported by state finance: major galleries and opera houses, orchestras and theatres and so on. The commercial sector is shaped by economic and competition policy and a raft of legislation that is not specific to cultural activity. And amateur and informal cultural activity is affected by myriad regulations on NGOs, youth services, education and much more.

It is essential that states recognise the whole ecology of culture and the complex ways its interconnects in shaping policy and legislation. Above all, they need to find a balance that allows each part of cultural life to thrive on its own terms without harming any other.

Too much or not enough state investment in public culture will produce negative results not just in that part of the ecology but in the commercial and amateur sectors too. Similarly an unrestrained commercial market for cultural goods can be as damaging as one that is too regulated. Good cultural policy is sensitive to complex interaction of all parts of the cultural economy and recognises the contribution of each to the whole.

We need investment in cultural research and development at the heart of policy

Everyone is familiar with the saying that only dead fish swim with the stream. Nowhere is this more true than in the cultural sector, which depends on the contrary instincts of artists to go against prevailing currents and find new paths. Society changes all the time. Unless cultures are allowed – encouraged even – to change as well, they cease to be inspirational and become burdensome. Dead cultures demand to be carried: living ones carry us.

But experimentation and research in arts and culture is rarely profitable in the short term, so we need a far-sighted understanding of future potential – not just in public culture but in the commercial and private sector as well. Research and development needs to be at the heart of cultural policy – but not just cultural policy.

The new ideas, practices and solutions that emerge from a creative culture have potential across the policy arena. It may be developing more creative, pupil-centred approaches to learning or designing out crime and fear in public spaces; it may be tackling youth unemployment through the creative industries or enriching the cultural lives older people. Public policy faces huge social, economic and environmental challenges in the 21st century. It cannot afford to do so without the imagination and creativity developed within the cultural sector.

We need artists and cultural actors to enact the ethical responsibilities of leadership

It has already be argued, perhaps controversially, that cultural actors and institutions cannot hold themselves apart from the current crisis. This is not to compare them to junk bond traders but to acknowledge that the hubris of unending growth was not confined to bankers and politicians. There is shared responsibility here, if it was just accepting increased spending on culture – in both public and private sector – without questioning its source of sustainability. Contemporary art prides itself on being challenging. It has, at best, been highly selective about who and what it has chosen to challenge in the past 30 years.

If cultural actors and institutions, artists and those who support them, are to be credible when they make large claims for the importance of their work – claims that are also made here – they must enact the values they proclaim. Independence, criticality, humanism, non-materialism, empathy – these and other values that lie at the heart of European culture, at its best, must be evident in all we do, not just in what we say. Only then can we be trustworthy partners, advocates and critics in the renewal of our culture, our economy, our society and our continent.