

## The art of being President.

As the presidential election approaches, our mouth waters in anticipation of the public debate on art and culture. However, aside from the proposals of Martine Aubry already consigned to oblivion, we see a presidential campaign taking shape in which there is very little space for art and culture, or at best will be handled through the somewhat limited prism of cultural industries or downloading on the Internet.

There will be no talk of living art, theatre, dance, musical creation, plastic arts or visual arts other than on the periphery of the great consensual idea which raises its head on the occasion of each electrical campaign: artistic education, always promised but never implemented as if something needed to be kept in hand for the subsequent campaign and as if we held on to this measure – important but prospective – to resolve the challenges of the day. As for the discourse emanating from the cultural milieu, it often starts with “re-“. It is necessary to re-shape, re-inject, re-construct, re-think, as if the current situation required nothing more than to “re-turn” to past solutions.

Yet in a country obsessed by debt and unemployment, in a country where fundamentalisms prosper, in a country torn between consumption and the environment where merchandise no longer makes dreams come true, living art is not merely an extra treat for a cultivated public; it is absolutely necessary for a society which is exploring its transformations, considering its future, inventing possibilities.

Against this backdrop, the Ministry of Culture appears crazed. Its word counts for nothing in the regions, it trails in the wake of the directives of the European Commission, it is bound by decisions taken elsewhere concerning occasional workers, taxation or labour law and clings to its last remaining power, that of making appointments, which are all too often arbitrary. Yet this ministry has never seemed quite as necessary as it does today, on condition that it focuses on those issues to which it is essential. In a new situation, a new dynamic, we could put forward four tangible lines of action:

- Never has the cultural superstructure been so suffocating, never have the constraints been so restrictive: complex taxation, labyrinthine social context, nit-picking security, Byzantine funding, changing priorities and a jungle of regulations... The artistic margin, which is the polite way of referring to what goes directly to the artists once the rest has been financed, is falling steadily. Subsidies “cost” more and more, any new measure is engulfed by a new constraint. Too many artists, as some might hint? Rather too many costs relating to the artistic process: the less money there is, the more people are paid to ensure it is spent correctly... Implementing a radical simplification of administrative, fiscal, security and regulatory constraints, adopting long-term contracts, allowing artists to invent new means of organisation, freeing initiatives – that is a project which is not highly mediated and which permits very few lyrical flights of fancy, but which is nevertheless quite simply essential.
- People who are elected or appointed to manage all our money and to make choices which are political but neither artistic nor cultural would increasingly seem to work under the mantra of “I pay so I decide”. The slow decline of the word of the Ministry of Culture, which appears to be neither a referee nor a reference, leaves the artists face to face with local authorities who too often expect them to provide electoral returns. There can be no important role for art and culture in society if artists and the directors of cultural entities are not given total independence – including in economic terms – and the possibility of being impertinent. The state – through its reserve, its long-term financial support, its artistic desire – must impose itself as the guarantor of this necessary freedom without which there can be no creation. For art to be useful, it must not be used.
- Whereas the European Commission is becoming the main authority regulating our professions (taxation, social status, competition, public interest services, calls to tender, etc.),

the Ministry of Culture has not tackled this Europe, either at national or international level, which has now become the most relevant sphere. We only need to witness the importance that art and culture have taken in a city as devastated as Marseille in the lead up to the European Capital of Culture. As artists are increasingly mobile across the continent and theatres and local authorities increase their partnerships, the state has little authority in this field and has yet to understand that it must define its doctrine and its tools, that it must be the bearer of this dimension at regional level and ensure a strong presence in the mysteries of the EU as well as through multilateral initiatives (Franco-German ARTE is a good example) in order to give rise to a debate on European cultural policy. This European dimension is also fundamental in extending our artistic presence to other continents, abandoning our cultural diplomacy which smells of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the panelling of embassies of a former colonial power.

- Modern-day artists have an unquenchable thirst for elsewhere. Their aim is not to wait quietly for their turn to occupy the stages or museums. They want to take over public spaces, towns, neglected sites, companies, public transport and hospitals. They want “to be part of it”, they want to participate in the never-ending debate on art and the city, art and society. Nevertheless, the only response of politicians to this is to inaugurate more and more cultural facilities for which the operating budgets alone will drain the meagre new resources which each individual minister endeavours to eke out. Never has the role of the Ministry of Culture been so decisive, not to serve as a fortress to protect works of art in danger but to lead the presence of art outside the dedicated sites and to be the pilot fish for artists in their dialogue with the other Ministries (City, Education, Youth and Sport, Foreign Affairs, Overseas Territories, Health, Home Affairs, etc.). This strong movement in favour of working outside the box, across the territory and in contact with the inhabitants is an exceptional tool to “liberate” art in our society.

Art and culture are not the old-fashioned memories of an obsolete France. They are flourishing, they help us to understand the world of today, they open minds and borders, they speak to all categories of society. Simplifying the work of professionals, guaranteeing the freedom of artistic teams, tackling the European reality in all its dimensions and accompanying the great desire for art which has broken free of conventions – these four very general lines of action could represent a noble challenge for a future Minister of Culture.

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