

Art and culture are under attack, but they can't afford to be timid

For the past 3 years in France, rather than being important objectives, art and culture have been seen as a source of savings. This is beginning to have catastrophic effects.

First of all there are the effects clearly identified by professionals, elected representatives and the media: a fall or at best a “freeze” in budgets, a collapse in funding for cultural action (whereas art in schools had been identified as a priority) or international cultural relations, a total absence of any European project, the weakening of the Ministry of Culture through the implementation of the Artistic Creation Council, ministerial musical chairs, stagnating administrations, arbitrary nominations which are far from transparent, the disappearance of the state's discourse in the region, threats to local authorities' budgets and to their basic right to support art and culture.

Consciously or otherwise, it is nothing less than a dismantling of 60 years of cultural policy. And why not? The French “model” is not without its faults, but this dismantling is accompanied by no vision, no strategy, no new idea.

Collateral effects are nevertheless becoming increasingly clear. Any change is seen as an attack, no one dares leave a job for fear of not finding an equivalent post, few new actions see the light of day, each individual clings to his or her own preserve, habits and networks. It is almost impossible to think, to dare, to change – terms which are nevertheless inseparable from artistic life.

The latest affair illustrates my point of view. The Villa Medici, a Mecca of “learned” culture at the heart of Rome, try something new. For two centuries, it has allocated grants and residences to contemporary artists, in particular composers. This year, the new Director has decided to support two composers from the world of academic music and two other artists from the worlds of jazz, improvisation and so-called current music.

The barricades were raised immediately. A petition collected 500 signatures, the majority of the jury resigned. The reasons are sound: support for contemporary music is becoming increasingly rare, festivals and production sites are closing and here is one of the pillars of this discipline reducing the number of residences.

Yet this defensive position is not pursued. Of course, the Villa Medici must be opened, that somewhat obsolete institution, a relic of the France of yesteryear, closed off behind its high walls, which cannot remain a perpetual source of grants forever. It must open its arms and embrace all artists, it must open up to its host city, it must open up to Europe and to the Mediterranean. This openness would not be a problem if contemporary music could also venture outside its own networks and take over museums, audio-visual services, major urban events.

The examples are countless. When the Théâtre National de Chaillot was assigned to the choreographic sector, the theatrical milieus gave a polite cough. When an author from mainstream popular theatre was appointed Director of a national centre for dramatic arts, there was general outcry. A theatre director went on hunger strike, all the great names rushed to his assistance without questioning the relevance of his work today.

Like fish in the net when the water is receding, we take action to maintain a minimum number of work areas. But is the word “maintain” even in our vocabulary?

Budgetary questions are fundamental, but it is the movement which creates the conditions – including the financial conditions – and not the budget which creates the movement. The 1970s were a decade of extraordinary creative development. At that time, the Ministry of Culture had a smaller budget, the Minister asked us to “choose between the begging bowl and the Molotov cocktail”, funding for cities and *départements* was stuttering and the regions did not exist.

In light of the considerable challenge facing us, of a political power which is literally asphyxiating our sector, the only solution is to invent. Not only to demonstrate solidarity between disciplines and avoid everything which might divide us, but to build – all of us together.

We fear the RGPP (general revision of public policies, the technocratic name for the reduction in state budgets), call on a General Revolution of Policies vis-à-vis the Publics by crossing disciplines, welcoming amateurs, taking over public spaces, hospitals and schools, by developing shared moments which can be enjoyed free of charge, by setting the milestones of a Europe of art, by ensuring our presence in the debates concerning the transformation of society, retirement or town planning, by inviting ourselves to be a part of the political debate, by inventing new relationships between art and society. And then, the politicians will be hurrying to accompany us.

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