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On Creative Connections, Innovative Change and the Arts

Corina Şuteu

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Looking at the evolution of international cultural cooperation and the parameters affecting it, Corina Şuteu analyses current challenges and the ongoing **change of cultural paradigms**. She argues that cultural actors should take an active role, abandoning utilitarian conceptions of culture and raising it up instead to its **true value** in society. She also suggests the need for a deeper understanding of the positive impact that past generations of cultural actors have had and the need to **empower individuals** to **build strategies for change**.

Change!

Change! This is the key word. It brings to mind a scene in *Loose Cannons*, the Italian film by Turkish director Ferzan Özpetek, when the old lady says “normalità, che brutta parola...” (“normality, what an ugly word”). ‘Change’, like ‘normality’, are two challenging and interlinked words.

Why do we really cherish change? It is, of course, because we strongly believe it will bring a better life and a better future. But those of us who have experienced profound, sudden and radical ‘change’ – such as the inhabitants of communist Europe after 1989 or of the Arab world today – know that change does not come naturally and is far from being a smooth process. There are agents (people and organisations) that make it happen, sometimes at the price of their ‘normal’ human aspirations or even their lives. In another film, a Bulgarian documentary this time, *Whose is This Song?*, a Macedonian taxi driver is asked what he would want if his country were to become a stable democracy, and his answer is: “I would want two weeks of paid holiday, a salary that is enough to meet the needs of me and my family without too much effort.” Normality may be an ‘ugly’ word, but it is a banal aspiration, for many.

I grew up with the censorship and intensely propaganda-oriented cultural life of Ceaușescu’s Romania before moving to France in 1995 to work as a trainer in cultural management and later to specialise in cultural policies. Then I worked for seven years in New York as a cultural diplomat where I privatised and ran a successful Romanian film season at the Film Society of Lincoln Center. From my perspective, there are many contradictory actors at play in the increasingly sophisticated game we call ‘culture and society’ today. What this journey through different cultures and societies has taught me is that change actually happens all the time. It comes, in Malcolm Gladwell’s words, at the moment when the ‘tipping point’ is reached, and it requires synergy between connectors, sellers, specialists and a particular context. At the same time, my international experience has taught me that there is an underlying, compelling dimension to bringing the individual creator back centre stage. Only then, I believe, will we be able to renegotiate the role of the arts in modern society, to re-appropriate the cultural institution in a participatory and transversal way and to rebalance the proportions between private and public investments in the creative areas. This is why the real issues facing cultural systems in Europe today involve managing the on-going change of cultural paradigms, providing inspirational new ideas to circumvent the ‘dead-end’ solutions of the past and bridging generational, economic and social gaps that are the result of recent radical changes across the globe.

During recent decades, very few organisations have had any success in even partially responding to these challenges by creating and delivering innovative capacity-building schemes and programmes. ECF is one of those few organisations. There is no better way to react to a changing framework than by working

to empower individuals to build strategies and tools adapted to these changes. Even so, processes on the go in the creative and cultural area globally are sometimes too complex to permit organisations with limited resources to respond as generously as they would wish.

This is why I will concentrate in the following narrative on the nature of the macro parameters that have impacted international cultural cooperation in Europe during the last 60 years or so. My aim is to show why the practices of past generations can still be a source of know-how essential for the policies and practices of the future.

Culture as providence

In this section I will discuss three interrelated issues. First, if the 1950s and the 1960s were ground-breaking years when Europe – inspired by a visionary desire to put World War II behind it – put in place an institutional framework in support of culture, founding ECF, the ‘Centre européen de la culture’ and the Council of Europe, the new millennium brought about the opposite situation. Instruments and institutions were there, but most of them were soon overwhelmed by the massive dynamics of globalisation and communication technology. A new order needs new ways, and those institutions were not designed for high-impact work at a global level. The question is, who will the content providers and the designers and engineers of radically innovative instruments in cultural cooperation be?

The second point is that, at the beginning of 2000, European cultural systems were on the cusp of profound change. Even ten years after the fall of Communism, the cultural scene in Eastern and South East Europe was still ‘contaminated’ (to use Borka Pavičević’s expression)¹ by strong ideological legacies, while in Western Europe four decades of generous state support for culture and institutional development in the arts were progressively giving way to a more parsimonious environment. Added to this, new technologies – the explosion of online communication and online content, twinned with the globalised aspects of what we can generically call ‘video culture’ – were about to radically change the paradigm of ‘elitist’ and territorially-defined cultural policies and international cultural practices in Europe. Putting cultural content online would make it more accessible but it would also cheapen it in comparison to other services that generically define social welfare.

An immense wealth of interdisciplinary possibilities emerged, but hand in hand with a banalisation and standardisation of the cultural good. Everything was possible and nothing was relevant for longer than a week, a day, an hour. What, in this context, was to become of the ideas of ‘participation’ and ‘access’ that had been the mantras of French cultural policy in the 1960s and how were the new audiences, born under a newly-designed global order of mass cultural consumption, global cultural communication and cultural connectedness and later on

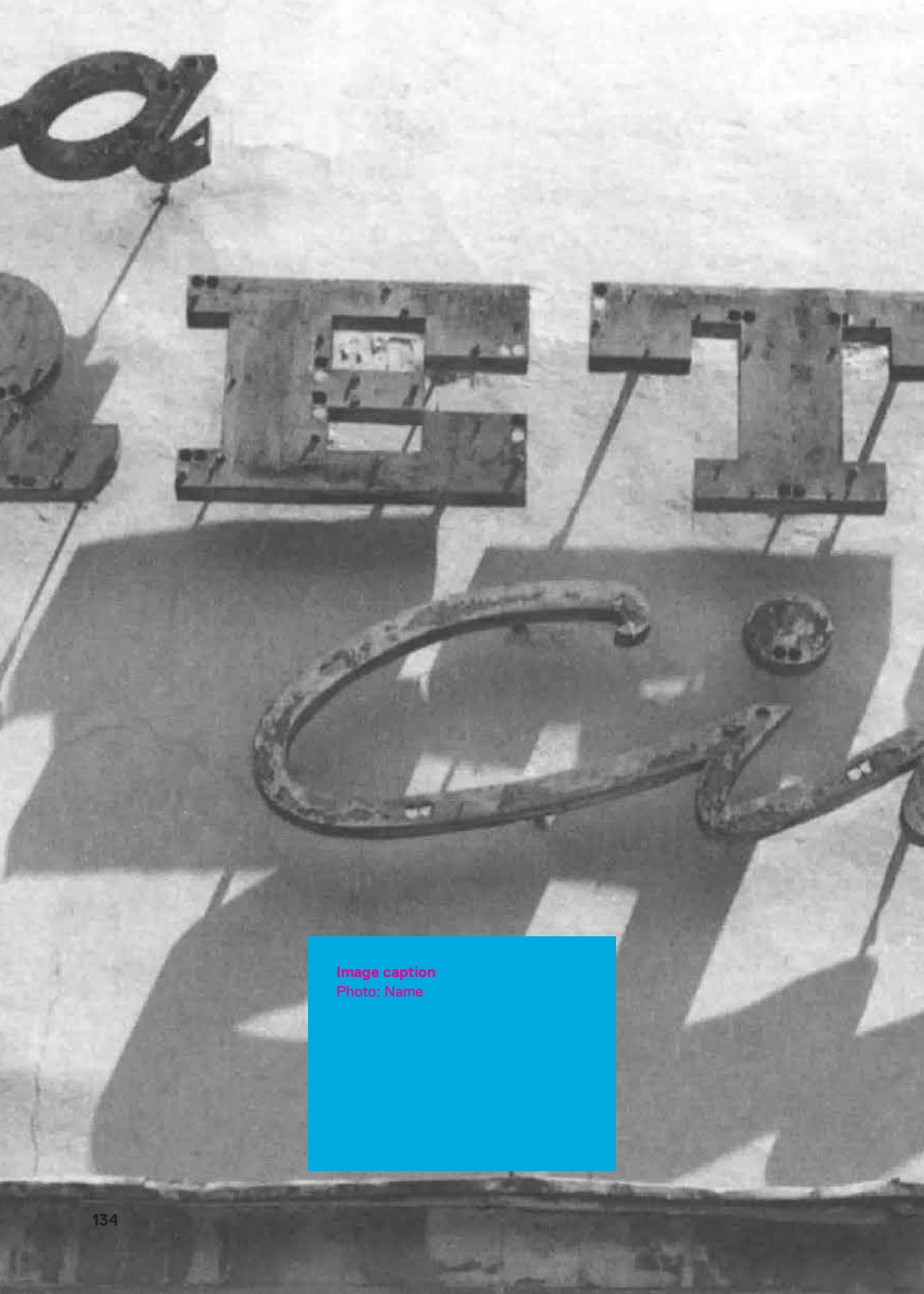


Image caption
Photo: Name

digitalisation, going to perform the part of the ‘cultural exception’ in the way it used to be played out by its intellectual and creative founders?

The third point is that the concept of culture as the gift of the providential state to the people has been losing the battle with global political, economic and social evolutions. Back in the 1990s, to be an independent cultural operator meant to be at least partially independent from state support, not fully institutionally stable, financially fragile and more or less marginal within the legitimate cultural system. To be independent was not really desirable, either. The flexibility, adaptability, entrepreneurial energy and connective competence of the independent label were seen as liabilities by an establishment designed to preserve its *status quo*. Today, independence is the golden apple in the cultural orchard. The individual and the ‘small organisations’ or the ‘network organisations’ have taken back responsibility and that has led to a re-working of the way cultural practices are used. Start-ups and creative industries are booming. As TEH, the Trans Europe Halles cultural network, www.teh.net puts it on its site, “the Future is no longer what it used to be”.

Culture in Europe is no longer offered at a low price to all by potent administrative structures like the ministries. Instead, access to it is provided in creative ways unknown to the ‘old continent’ by individuals and organisations labouring intensively and efficiently at the grassroots level. Heavy-weight institutions like L’Opéra Bastille or the Tate Modern, the great German orchestras and Italian opera houses face the prospect of budget cuts, job losses and reduced activities. In 2014, a small philharmonic ensemble in Romania played for one night with half of its staff, while the rest were working on cruise ships in the Mediterranean to earn money. The time of the monumental cultural institution is over. *Culture for all* is no longer synonymous with a top-down dynamic whereby audiences are attracted towards a pre-defined object of consumption, but with a constantly moving participative wave that allows people to create their own cultural habits, jumping in 24 hours from a ‘video on demand’ night at home to a jazz-contemporary dance performance in a night club and a session of music listening, while jogging, via an iPhone. Individual taste, eclectic, volatile, entertainment-oriented, is today the engine powering the public cultural goods promoted and distributed via social media, email, YouTube and other digital forms. And despite a generalised tendency to demonise the neoliberal approach of the markets and to consider it at the origin of this phenomenon, the reality is that the main catalysts to this radical shift are technology and the boom of global communication.

In short, culture today is simply lifestyle or, in other words, a fusion between global identity, local cultural legacies, informal and formal education, activism for environmental causes, propaganda for tourism and passion for everything else that touches one’s mind and soul. How can relevance and meaning be extracted from this loose system of elements that constantly reorganise themselves according to *ad hoc* factors and influences?

Looking back for answers

In the middle of the 1990s, during a gathering of the executive board of the Informal European Theatre Meeting (this huge network today is called IETM, www.ietm.org the international network for contemporary performing arts), the much-lamented late Dragan Klaić tried to convince the rest of the members present just how useful email can be for immediate communication. I remember thinking at the time, “never in my life will I use it”! Today I am addicted to my BlackBerry and the internet and I sometimes even wonder how we could possibly communicate and exist without these tools.

At the end of the 1980s, networks looked completely ‘out of the box’ for the official cultural establishment. What started as tools for flexible, simple and human-faced cultural and artistic cooperation were the timely consequence of a process begun by this very establishment a decade ago. Festivals grew more important in Europe at the time and festival curators developed organically into a small professional community that shared information, discussed artistic choices, shaped the context and led it towards a logic of decentralised, anti-hierarchical cooperation between creative people and innovative organisers rather than institutions. Initiated in 1981 during the Polverigi Festival in Italy, the IETM network was born out of the coming together of just six professionals representing performing arts organisations from different European countries. Today, it has 500 active members and numerous allied partners and its web-like structure appears perfectly adapted to the connective vibe of the internet-driven era.

More or less the same moment of the 1980s saw the start of the courageous institutional adventure of the Halles de Schaerbeek www.halles.be in Brussels, in which a former market was turned into a multidisciplinary artistic hub under the enduring and pioneering vision and energy of Philippe Grombeer. The Halles experiment of transforming an industrial site into a cultural one was replicated elsewhere in the 1980s, leading to the creation of another network, Trans Europe Halles. From La Friche Belle de Mai in Marseille to Melkweg in Amsterdam and Village Underground in London, TEH was the network that legitimised in Europe the right for artistic expression in uncommon places and made interdisciplinary a rule for successful programming, mixing high art and entertainment, literature and circus, architecture and rock music.

What is crucial to observe is that the group of dedicated professionals creating these networks was shaped informally in the beginning, a sort of echo of the Bloomsbury Group – of organisers rather than intellectuals – on a European scale. They survived thanks to institutionalisation; indeed they *had to* become established in order to exist and function on the national and international map as it then was. Of course, institutionalising came easily to them as they were not only individuals but represented organisations. However, those of us who remember the earlier days of cultural networks know that it was the personality of individual

networkers that mattered and not the institution they represented. The network model had such a strong impact on the philosophical reassessment of the functioning of the cultural institutional system in Europe that organisations like the ‘Centres culturels de rencontre’ in France or the German writers’ residencies declared themselves networks despite the fact they were top-down institutional linkages, diametrically opposed to the grassroots initiatives that networks were. In the 1990s, a Forum of Networks was created to coordinate (and discipline), under the umbrella of the Council of Europe, this nebula of flexible institutions that menaced the established logic of the ‘bureaucratic’ cultural institutions that had dominated the cultural scene since the late 1970s.

The early 1980s were also the moment when LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre) www.liftfestival.com was launched by four women (with Rose Fenton and Lucy Neal at the forefront), bringing global theatre to British audiences at a time when theatre travelled with difficulty and the only way of choosing a play to watch was to go and see it. Pioneering in its concept of performance at a global scale, totally dedicated to the idea of cultural intersection and breaking established boundaries, LIFT offered a unique perspective on Europe’s institutional and organisational limitations and was one of the key founders of the strong ‘festival culture’ in Europe. This emphasis on the festival’s potential as a creative and inspiring hub also helped to shake off the idea that the traditional cultural institution with its annual programming, choices and taste guidance was the only legitimate player within the Western cultural system. Like cultural networking, LIFT was proposing a more participatory and transversal instrument for cultural life, pushing the limits of mainstream art by mixing it with alternative forms and consistently broadening the exposure of audiences to a far more cosmopolitan taste and creative vibe.

During the same decade, in France and in Germany, contemporary dance was legitimised by figures like Dominique Baguet and Pina Bausch, to give just two names, leading to the creation of a new kind of institution open to work born from the intersection of creative trends coming from theatre, visual arts and classical dance. Other new organisational configurations included those inspired by Peter Brook (the research theatre laboratory at the Bouffes du Nord) or the Union des théâtres de l’Europe founded in 1990 in France around Giorgio Strehler. Jack Lang started his ministerial career in 1981 and he, too, represented a landmark for the institutional redesign of art and culture on a European scale as a collective celebration, international intersection and basis for the emergence of an alternative scene. Still a powerful cultural influence in the 1980s, France set the tone for cultural dynamics by shaking off the old-fashioned sense of compact, official national identities and injecting them with a diversity-driven, minority-preoccupied, globally aware dimension.

The fall of Communism brought about another type of regeneration. Cultural networks were, once again, instrumental in connecting and inspiring creative

participation". Watching the award ceremony on YouTube, one sees Celakoski with the Teatro Valle people and wonders to what extent he actually felt in fusion with their approach and desires, how much he actually and *honestly* mirrored himself in their action. And reflecting over the answer to this, one realises that, in fact, the two approaches start from opposite corners but meet exactly midway. Celakoski reinvents the 'network institution' or the 'open source institution' where it cannot function any longer in the traditional way, but he uses it to fix a huge systemic collapse. The Teatro Valle movement tries to give back the venue to its artistic owners and to reinvent a way of functioning that is more in tune with artistic logic. Where traditional administrative standards (i.e., the established mode of functioning) failed, the movement of Teatro Valle has found an uncommon solution for rebirth.

When, in 2002, Teodor Celakoski and Emina Višnić proposed the founding of the network Clubture within the framework of *Policies for Culture* (a programme run by ECUMEST and ECF), [Philippe Dietachmair p.74](#) their ideas of non-institutional culture and 'open source' type of cultural networking were barely conceivable to the majority of artists and cultural administrators in Europe. And yet, as described above, there is a long, slow and submerged history behind this concept, allowing these new forms of thinking to emerge and develop in an oblique but effective way.

After the fall, after the integration, after the crisis and moving forward

Reunited Europe – by which I mean the new Europe after the fall of Communism and the EU integration of some former Communist countries – raised three important dilemmas to be addressed, in the long term, by the creative and intellectual communities living on the 'old continent' and taking 'free' culture (in both senses of the word) for granted:

- It questioned the sense of belonging to a 'European Soul' and also the common values that Eastern and Western Europe actually shared.
- It questioned the capacity and the time needed to educate for change and to integrate within the architecture of capacity-building programmes the unprecedented speed of change.
- It shed renewed light on the importance of free expression in democracy and the links between diversity of cultural expression and democracy.

Cultural networks were transformed from loose club-like platforms into active instances of transformation, fostering interactive processes between cultures and professional and creative individuals who came from very different ideological and existential backgrounds. They also became important intercultural training platforms as well as reconceptualising themselves, committing to support mobility,

professional debate on arts and culture issues on a European scale and offering expertise to top policy-makers. Culture Action Europe, www.cultureactioneurope.org for example, is one of the visible outcomes of this gradual progression via which networks have become credible advocates for European cultural policy-making.

Cultural management and cultural policies developed into real academic and capacity-building preoccupations as crucial aspects of cultural exchange: generating empathy, trust and open dialogue proved to be the most efficient vectors of transformation and transmission of values on a European scale. Also, these disciplines became crucial at the moment when the public subsidy for the arts and culture reduced drastically across Europe. The concepts of 'official culture', 'hegemonic cultures' and 'legitimate' versus 'irrelevant' cultures entered the debate on cultural rights at the very heart of the European continent. Today, the 'narrative for Europe' tells the story of a much more diverse and eclectic continent, due to the conflicting, but invigorating moments provided by both the fall of Communism and the European integration process. The question arising here is whether cultural interaction, international cultural cooperation and the capacity-building and generous mobility schemes addressing the creative sector have had an impact beyond the creative and intellectual community. Have these processes been successful in including social transformation and 'accommodation' in Europe? Have they actually led to a better understanding of democratic values?

In searching for answers, it will help to consider how the debate appears from the other side of the Atlantic. There is no more efficient way of understanding Europe than by being outside it, on the 'new continent'. From the United States, Europe looks small, cohesive and very culturally sophisticated. It is enough to visit other cities apart from New York, New Orleans or San Francisco to see how cultivated, 'spoiled' and profoundly culturally assisted, intellectually informed and aware European audiences are in comparison to American ones. Also, how much of a past identity-oriented culture European states protect and provide. As a cultural diplomat coming from the 'old continent' to New York, one notices immediately that the standard, pre-constructed, silent hierarchies that exist in Europe between European nations disappear. French, German, Slovak and Slovenian, Romanian and Hungarian diplomatic agencies face a real need to label themselves simply as 'European' in America. Nothing is more efficient in making one accept and love the European Union than perceiving New Yorkers' attitude toward European culture and societies. No one there understands the territorial and linguistic nation state notion in Europe – these entities seem too tiny! No one there takes seriously the ideas of high and low culture or the notion that culture is not also entertainment or, at least education, or militant enterprise or... something, anything, as long as it is useful!

What they do understand, and understand very well, is democracy and the right to free and unrestricted creative expression. A personal experience there



Image caption (above)
Image caption (below)
Film still: Name

with a street art exhibition (*Freedom for Lazy People*), organised around three young Romanian street artists who later worked for a Bill T. Jones performance on Broadway (FELA), bringing the Romanian Cultural Institute as a sponsor on the show – a unique opportunity for a European cultural agency – grew into an immense public scandal back home. The reasons for this were that, for one, the street art was not supposed to ‘represent’ Romania and, second, that one of the conceptual objects used in the exhibit’s presentation, sharply alluding to the over-consumerist era we live in, was a drawing of a small swastika on the back of a My Little Pony toy, and was interpreted by a biased Romanian press and conservative diaspora as a ‘fascist symbol’, promoting fascist values. Fuelled by overt manipulation, public reactions in Romania were very negative, despite unprecedented explanatory and educational arguments put forward by the artists, intellectuals and the media and despite the success of the exhibit with foreign audiences. This reaction (immediately used to political ends against the president of the Romanian Cultural Institute at the time) was revelatory and worrying.

While in the US the exhibition was a huge success, generating an extremely positive image of the country, in Romania it unveiled the hidden reality of a failed democratic transition (this event happened in 2008). The ‘pink pony scandal’, as it came to be known, also revealed the fact that there was an important schism between the cultivated, initiated, informed levels of the intellectual and creative community – whose cosmopolitan artistic tastes and practices were in synchronicity with the West, and the society they lived in, the ‘normal’ Romanian population. Average public opinion was radical and unanimous: “this is not art and this is in no way representative of Romanian identity”. Of course, contemporary art is always a tough sell for cultural diplomacy and there are many examples in Europe where public money allocated to cutting-edge creative products has been contested by the taxpayers. But in this case the central point of discussion revolved around the idea that not all forms of art are acceptable and that those who believe they are must be publicly punished. (The upshot of the scandal was that the Romanian Senate initiated a commission to evaluate the work of art in question. Ultimately, the president of the commission understood that this was not the best idea to pursue.)

One conclusion to draw from this is that the space for freedom of expression that was encouraged and provided to Eastern European countries by Western interaction has had the unfortunate effect of creating a limited and self-referential group inside former Communist societies. These people and organisations are an elite, but this elite – cosmopolitan, respectful of democratic values, democracy and artistic freedom – either lives outside the countries or, if living inside, is almost entirely powerless to counteract the massive and systemic effects of generalised political corruption, partial or failed post-Communist institutional restructuring, the influence of private TV stations supported by political oligarchs of the new

generation, the social effects of high unemployment, the global crisis and the geopolitical rearrangements impacting negatively on a region that has been constantly under stress since 1989. This is, unfortunately, the experience of democracy for the average Eastern European.

Another conclusion to be drawn is that the cultural community has lost all public authority in the new post-Communist context and that the societies in that part of the world are drifting further and further away from notions like open dialogue, tolerance, understanding and the axiom that arts have the right to multiple expression and to play a critical and non-conformist role within society.

Building a new destiny for the arts and creative and intellectual communities

Today, we ‘occupy’, we ‘share’, we ‘like’, but do we actually understand each other better? And do we really understand ourselves?

To answer the questions formulated at the beginning of this contribution relevance in art is measured today by our capacity to generate a sufficient critical mass of individual ‘users’ and make them ‘follow’ us. Art is consumed by the consumer who, at the same time, infuses it with relevance. Consumers are creating and branding themselves at the same time and this synchronicity defines the paradox of maximum communication (access) and instant reactivity (participation). Access and participation are a given, as long as almost everything can be digitalised in the long run and as long as augmented reality will, sooner than we think, become affordable to many.

As for the content providers and future engineers of policies and cultural practices – people one imagines will be the new shapers of the creative reality – their task needs to be to assist in pulling culture back from a bluntly economic and utilitarian understanding to a space where it can regain individual and collective meaning. Maybe some inspiration should be taken from the glut of strong personalities in the 1980s, essentially because these were the years when the creative individual was at the heart of institution-building, and when the architecture of the cultural system was modelled according to creative needs and not the other way around. One can only resist standardisation by putting critical subjectivity centre stage, where it belongs.

Another recent recipient of the ECF Princess Margriet Award for Culture, Dan Perjovschi,² [↗ Concepts p. x](#) whose ephemeral drawings are a brilliant synthesis of socio-political observation and sharp philosophical meditation, entitles one of his works: “I am not exotic, I’m exhausted”. Reading him, one can only conclude that in our time artists should find their way back to being what they have always been for humanity: an irreplaceable mirror leading to spiritual inspiration and higher moral aspirations. Artists are not to be disregarded as mere volatile connective figures; they are not just creators of ‘entertaining gadgets’. Rather, they are

designers of precious and unique moments that help us disconnect from what lies outside; they are providers of experiences that help each one of us to reconnect with our inner world.

Teatro Valle’s story of ‘occupation’ goes like this: “we did an illegal thing by entering the theatre and we knew it, but as soon as we were inside, it felt as if a new legality was created and this was strong and beautiful”. Not only do artists become disconnectors, but they have to create new rules and are perfectly capable of doing so, as the Teatro Valle experience shows.

References

- ¹ Borka Pavićević is the Founder and Director of the Centre for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade, Serbia.
- ² The visual artist Dan Perjovschi received the ECF Princess Margriet Award for Culture in 2013, together with his wife Lia Perjovschi.

Biography

Corina Șuteu is a cultural entrepreneur, an international consultant, a researcher and educator, President of FilmETC [↗ www.filmetc.org](http://www.filmetc.org) and the Making Waves film festival in New York. Together with ECF, she co-initiated the *Policies for Culture* regional framework programme, which aimed to encourage participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of new effective cultural policies in South East Europe.