

Arts and Culture, Instruments for Cooperation and Development

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Nowadays, nobody knows what the year ahead will bring after the pandemic, and, more specifically, if as citizens we will be able to preserve our rights and remember that the ultimate goal of governments is to create a better and more egalitarian world. In such an uncertain scenario, it is also reasonable to ask about the role of art, as it has always been an instrument more or less politicized by the structures of power and only from the modern era began to be considered as the individual expression of an artist. Now more than ever, we need initiatives like the Biennale des Jeunes Créateurs de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée, an international network that gives young artists an opportunity to develop their creations, travel and exchange knowledge with other artists in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

As the year 2020 comes to an end, we are all asking ourselves what the year ahead will bring.¹ The most widespread belief is that life after the pandemic will not be the same as before. Indeed, life is never the same after a crisis, whether personal or, as this one has been, collective. The premise is therefore a rhetorical one and the issue at stake is not whether life will be “the same as before” because we know it will not but, rather, “what sort” of life it will be: the main question, indeed, is whether we will be capable of imagining a different way forward for humankind.

This is not the first time that our species has been confronted with a pandemic but it is the first time that a pandemic has spread as quickly as this one. And, although we live in

modern times, we are not sure whether it will entail consequences, also in terms of threats, that will go beyond our initial thinking. The immediate and direct threat has been to our public health systems and we have had to respond to the incredible danger posed to the health of many and to a tragic loss of too many lives. But there are other potential threats that might not be immediately appreciated to their full extent. The first is to our economies and to what, in Western societies, we refer to as welfare: jobs have been lost, businesses have collapsed, and social disruption might follow because of widespread anger, despair and lack of means for survival. The second is posed by the enhanced and reinforced control that we all might be subjected to in the name of

1. This article was written in December 2020.

health and security: this could in fact be the very unfortunate justification that paves the way towards curtailing basic civil and political rights. Such concerns have started to surface, initially from single, dispersed voices that have slowly but steadily taken the form of stronger grouped positions.

Indeed, the pandemic has been the perfect pretext for the perfect storm, but we have not come this far in history and in the preservation of human rights to have them jeopardized: as Yuval Noah Harari wrote, having to choose between privacy and health is a false choice and we can protect our health “not by instituting totalitarian surveillance regimes, but rather by empowering citizens.”² Faced with an unprecedented crisis, we have striven to give the best possible answers to the challenges before us, and this with more or less success. It is not, and has never been, a question of right or wrong but, rather, of whether we have been able to properly address and respond to the issues at stake. Indeed, future generations will assess, far better than we can today, what has really happened. This is indeed the privilege of history: understanding the past when, for those who lived through it, it was an impossible task. Our species will survive; humankind will pull through this crisis as it has done through many others. In fact, at the end of the day, this pandemic will probably have killed fewer people than the Spanish Flu of the beginning of the 20th century or World War II but, also, many fewer than those killed during the Biblical or bubonic plagues. However, this is not the main question because any loss of life is to be regretted; the questions are related, rather, to what the long-term consequences of the pandemic will be and to whether we will be capable of shaping to a different world because, although we all know that the world will not be the same

as before, we cannot anticipate how it will have changed and whether it will be for better or for worse. Son of the Mediterranean Sea, Harari pleads for the need to empower citizens as the antidote to dazed societies made up of unresponsive individuals; for the need to foster and enable cooperation as the response to isolation and nationalistic drives that might tear down the existing democratic governance systems. In a complementary line, Pierre Manent calls our attention to the risk of handing over our welfare and wellbeing to the state and defends the idea that the health emergency should not lead to an extended state of emergency where full powers over citizens are devolved to the higher state authorities.³

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At the heart of the debate is whether we will be able to keep in mind that the aim of any governance system is the preservation and betterment of the common good. Indeed, in most of the Ancient world, the public space was where politics was discussed. The Ancient Romans only perfected the art of governing collectively: the public space was where the *res publica* was shaped, where that which was of “public interest” was discussed and decided, where that which defined the commonality, in the sense of the spirit of cooperation and belonging arising from common interests and goals, was assessed. It is obvious that today we undoubtedly lack the necessary public space to perfect the art of governing and that the virtual social networks in no way satisfy this need. Two questions arise: the first is whether in this moment of transition (or crisis) we are

2. Y. N. Harari, “The World After Coronavirus”, *Financial Times*, 20 March 2020.

3. E. Bastié, “Entretien à Pierre Manent”, *Le Figaro*, 23 April 2020.



Mediterranea 18 Young Artists Biennale, Tirana and Durres, 2017, "A Natural Oasis?" (Project by Marco Alfieri).

witnessing the end of a system and, concretely, whether or not our representative democracies, currently disguised as falsely participatory, are actually coming to an end. The second is what role culture and the arts, as well as artistic and cultural organizations, can play today in helping to shape our future. Indeed, there is an ongoing debate as to whether culture and the arts have an instrumental value whereby they provide for economic and social benefits exclusively; or whether culture and the arts have an intrinsic value and, consequently, are understood as a public good in their own right.

The principal meaning of intrinsic is that of being "essential to" or "the essence of". Hence, when referring to arts and culture, "intrinsic value" refers to their unique value as such but also to the ways in which they affect each of

us individually and subjectively in intangible and hard-to-measure ways, both emotional and spiritual. By contrast, "instrumental value" refers to the ways in which the arts and culture generate objective measurable benefits. These can be economic or social. In the past decades, economists have sought to develop ways of measuring this value, for example through an assessment of the effects on the wellbeing of the individual drawing on systems of valuation deployed in other areas in which performance and impact have proven difficult to measure, primarily health and the environment.

Beyond this debate, there is a major challenge for the cultural sector: the need to acknowledge that it is not about an "either/or" equation and accept that the arts and culture have been, more often than not, instrumen-

talized towards political ends. Indeed, culture had always been an instrument for and of the political discourse; the belief in the contrary would be naïve. Societies have been built on a “cultural construct” sometimes spontaneously generated but, others times, imposed from above. Culture has always been the sphere for shared sense-making and socialization, and it has also been qualified: the question is by whom. The truth is that throughout history art has been, is and will be instrumentalized always in the service of power. Without exceptions, the governing power canalizes through art the messages it needs to build and maintain its power. At the service of power, art serves the purpose of creating, or maintaining, a set of symbolic references to which the people can relate. At times, it serves either purposes of celebration or helps in “telling stories”, or both. Let us take just one example: the Ancient Roman arches of triumph. These were built to celebrate the “triumph”, that is, the return of the victorious army after a campaign. The army marched under the arch which in turn remained in its place to remind everybody of that particular moment of glory. But arches, columns and other monuments are also there to tell stories: the sculpted bas-reliefs tell the people, in a simple visual language that everybody can understand, what happened, where and who the protagonists were. It would be the able Emperor Augustus who would use art, and in particular, the poetic genius of Virgil and the economic aid of Maecenas, the first known philanthropist to write an epic poem, *The Aenid*, by which Romans were told that the emperor was a direct descendant of Aeneas and therefore of the gods. Indeed, Augustus used art, in this case poetry, as the means to construct the justification of his and his family’s position of power, consolidating the shift to a “monarchy”: he had a very specific political aim, but one of the finest ever epic poems was the instrument. And here lies one of the most obvious conclusions: art is

instrumentalized but art is also an instrument *per se*. An instrument that, when there was no printed paper or other more sophisticated means of communication, told people stories, usually related to their past, in order to create a bonding and sense of belonging, a means to channel history. The same could be said for the art of the Middle Ages, both Romanesque and Gothic: the artists, architects and painters may be unknown to us but their art served as a means to propagate and strengthen a particular cosmological vision of the world.

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The real breakthrough does not really come with the Renaissance, for although the use of the artist’s name begins to gain importance, the same artists are still working in *botteghe* along with other fellow artists. The portrait given by Irving Stone of the tortured Michelangelo in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* is, although compelling and exciting to read, an interpretation made by the author using the cultural, aesthetic and philosophical references of our contemporary world. It was in the 19th century and with the rise of Romanticism that the notion of the artist with a capital A came into existence. The artist as a unique, and tremendously gifted, human being who, through a complex and tortured personal process, creates art, again with a capital A: the so-called *artiste maudit*. What Isaiah Berlin calls the revolt of the 19th century has a deep meaning indeed in history. For if it is true that the system that existed throughout the Ancient World, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was the same, it is also true that such a system had solid philosophical and religious roots, platonic in origin, whereby as Berlin puts



Through the Barricades, Milan, 2015 (Michele D'Ottavio).

it: “To a genuine question, there was one true answer.”⁴ Throughout history and until well into the 19th century, art and artists were at the service of a collectively accepted “truth” and the perpetuation of this truth through a process of mimesis, that is of imitation or reproduction of that truth. It was only in the 19th century that the German philosopher Herder, among others, would reach a position by which he was able to state that art is the means of self-expression of the individual spirit.

The problem today lies primarily in the fact that we have all, individually and collectively,

lost the drive to be active players in the sense-making, socializing and qualifying arena. We do not partake of the public space but we have the simplistic belief that we contribute to the shaping of the *res publica* through social media. Moreover, we have shielded ourselves behind the idea of the *unicum* that art represents but this is very far from what has happened throughout most of history: artists as active members of society working on their craft, at times only “imitating”, through a process of nemesis, others trying to “make sense” of the world around them, at the service of a broader

4. I. Berlin, “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, Pimlico, 1998, p. 555.

common good with which the rest could easily identify.

The “dismeasure” between art and culture has always been present in the history of humankind insofar as art and culture have always (re)interpreted the given reality, but always as part of it; today, the issue seems to be the existing divide between citizens and those who govern. As citizens we are entitled to the fulfillment of our civil and political rights and, by extension, of our economic, social and cultural rights. Our right to culture is not only about our right to access culture; it is also about our right (and duty/obligation) to participate in culture: through our active participation in culture we can therefore make, as citizens, our contribution to society and participate constructively in it. In a period of crisis such as we are going through today, the risk of there being parts of society which drift towards extremes is very high. Culture and art should provide the seeds for debate and discussion, for profound questioning at both individual and collective levels. It is undeniable that today we lack such a debate; and that art and culture do not provide for it, beyond a very restricted circle of members of a so-called elite that thrives on its own exclusivity. As Pascal Gielen, one of the main theorists of the “public value of culture” concept argues, culture is the substructure of society,⁵ it is the basis on which we give meaning to our lives in society, but it is also the basis for the economic and political aspects of this same society. It also sustains the design and implementation of public policies and independent initiatives and has an unquestionable potential to foster active and participative citizenship but also employment, social cohesion and gender equality. It is also a powerful, essential tool to sustain regional integration and stability as well as a tool to increase people’s resilience and empowerment.

In this line of thought, Gielen argues the importance of the role of the “civil space”. In his view, this is a space, not necessarily well-defined, not “legal” and not “public” in the institutional sense of the word, where people freely organize themselves. The important idea is that in the civil space people can work together for a specific aim: it is where people can get together “to do”, to act. Nevertheless, in a society that is currently losing its references, such action must be grounded against a constitutional praxis that provides for a sense of security: arts and culture can indeed provide for the much-needed sense-making in society, and it can also instill a sense of direction and provoke change. But it can only do so if well-grounded and if the actors involved are conscious as to the need for them to take on a shared responsibility in the process. Only then do arts and culture contribute actively to constructive citizenship.

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In this regard, there is a need for cultural professionals and artists to fully embrace the notion that their work not only has a meaning *per se* but that, above all, their work has a power that should not be undervalued. Just as art and culture can be, will be and has been instrumentalized for reasons of power, the real challenge lies in deciding in which direction this power should be channeled. Moreover, cultural organizations should also acknowledge the idea that they function as “public spaces” where citizens are put in the condition of not only understanding their history but also analyzing their memories and shaping their futures.

5. P. Gielen et al., *Culture: The Substructure for a European Common. A Research Report*, Groningen, University of Groningen, 2014.

The Biennale des Jeunes Créateurs de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (BJCEM)⁶ is an international network that provides training, mobility and exchange opportunities for young artists across the Euro-Mediterranean region with the aim of fostering mutual and intercultural understanding but also of serving as a platform for their professional development. Its flagship event is the Biennale of Young Artists from Europe and the Mediterranean, an exhibition that, every two years, showcases young artists in the fields of cinema, music, food, art, theatre, dance and literature. Since 1985, 18 biennials have been organized, involving over 10,000 young artists and over 750,000 visitors. From May to October 2021, with the support of the Government of the Republic of San Marino, *Mediterranea 19 – School of Waters* will showcase in historical venues and museums of San Marino 79 young artists from 21 countries of the Euro-Mediterranean region selected through an open call. This edition of the Biennale is special, not only because it has come to be during the on-going pandemic, but because it is the result of a long-term curatorial and creative process. Indeed, *Mediterranea 19 – School of Waters*⁷ imagines the BCJEM Biennale “as a temporary school inspired by radical and experimental pedagogies and the way they challenge artistic, curatorial and research formats”⁸ with the aim of shaping a new and challenging vision of the Mediterranean area. The curatorial team, composed of two senior and six junior curators with diverse origins, has worked during the last five years on a continued research project and, in their own words, has delved into the reinterpretation,

through contemporary art, of “the material and symbolic agency of waters” from a geopolitical and ecological perspective hoping to “rediscover the watery syncretism that constituted the Mediterranean as a complex platform of life forms and knowing processes.”⁹

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Mediterranea 19 indeed seeks to rediscover the elements that, albeit diverse, sustain the commonalities of the region, with the aim of creating a sense of belonging through a shared past but also joint future: “The impossible act of writing in water is the core of an imagined school where water as a sentient entity is both amenable and resistant to cognitive taming.”¹⁰

Culture and the arts are the indispensable elements that help shape each human being to become critical, constructive and participative citizens. Ensuring that access to and participation in culture are guaranteed is crucial because individual human rights, just like freedom of expression or religion, the right to education or to decent employment, cannot be curtailed. In this endeavor, cultural professionals and artists must take sides and decide how they can make a difference; because no one should ever doubt that this is also their role.

6. See www.bjecm.org

7. In English, the term “school” has different meanings and has been, because of this, chosen for this exhibition. The noun “school” refers to “a large number of fish or aquatic animals of one kind swimming together”, to “a group of artists under a common influence” and to “a source of knowledge” (see the Merriam-Webster Dictionary at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/school>).

8. See <https://mediterraneabiennial.org/School-of-Waters>

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

It has been a long and complicated year and the world is undergoing a major crisis. Indeed, the disruption triggered by the pandemic will have long-lasting consequences that are hard to clearly envisage and the challenges that lie ahead are all crucial for the future of humankind. Everywhere, the cultural sector has been hit very hard. The initial wave of positive sentiments generated by the pandemic entailed the proliferation of spontaneous initiatives from the sector. However, this wave has dwindled when confronted with reality: culture has shown that it is essential for human beings, but the public initiatives launched to support the cultural sector, in Europe but also in the rest of the world, lack a structured and systemic approach. It is undeniable that there is an urgent need for policies and mechanisms based on the concept of solidarity to preserve

the diversity and capacity of the sector, fundamental assets for democratic societies and competitive economies. The challenges are enormous, and it is hard to understand why, although a buzzword in most political circles, the role and importance of culture and the arts are continuously curtailed. It is not only about the future of culture, of the cultural sector and of artists, but the role that culture plays in fostering solid and constructive relations throughout the world and the public value of culture as an essential element of human development that fosters a greater common good. It is about being able to say and demonstrate that culture does not forbid but, rather, enables us all to be responsible, trustworthy, active, participative and creative citizens who seek to contribute to the shaping of the public space in which we all live and thrive.