

Where are the artists in the great global debates of our time?

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As a researcher and as someone who spent five years working at the Council of Europe, I am to some extent an outsider in this debate, and my perspective is slightly different from that of most people here.

Now that you have sampled the Finnish winter you can understand why Finnish art, from paintings to films, is often quite gloomy – perhaps you have seen some of our films and have found it difficult to understand their mood. Now you can feel the type of sky, the type of sun under which Finnish artists work, and the darkness which is sometimes so difficult to bear. And you can imagine what happens in the summer, when the light comes.

Gloomy these artists may be, but they have played an extremely important role in Finnish culture. About a hundred years ago, in creating Finnish cinema, they gave us an identity – it was they who took the lead in that respect. This is what happens in many small countries, and today it is a particular feature of countries regaining their independence. At the beginning of modernism, individual artists could be facilitators, tell the nation where to go. Good artists still fulfil this role today.

We live in an age of global reports and global discourse. We are already used to communicating worldwide on the internet, and we also find we can influence policymakers in big transnational cooperative structures, from Brussels to Washington. The 1990s have seen countless committees and summits on issues like the environment, poverty, human suffering. There is an urgent need to debate important issues at global level, and we must understand that we are all in this global game whether we like it or not. What we do at home affects people in other countries; no decision is taken at local level without it having some kind of a wider impact.

Yet artists have taken no part in these debates. They did not go to Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro, they did not attend the social summit in Copenhagen, nor did they participate in the debate on poverty and the problems of the developing world. Where were they? A hundred years ago artists were deeply involved in political debates. Some ten years ago, UNESCO started looking at the cultural dimension of development and development policies, when it became clear that economic policies were foundering because they failed to take culture into account. Companies learned that if they built huts in Africa, they first had to understand the life of the village, or their investments would be wasted. If they built a single public toilet for a whole village, it would be useless in a culture that forbade men and women to use the same toilet. So there would be an excellent toilet that would remain unused. Many other similar failures could be cited, that arose because policy-makers, decision-makers, did not have a grasp of the cultural dimension.

But perhaps it is also the failure of the artists, in that they have not been able to communicate this – to bring home to decision-makers that there is more to life than economics and politics. We have been addressing these and other issues for ten years now, for instance at the big international conference on 'Our creative diversity' in Stockholm last March. Policymakers tried to look into the future and to see the impact on culture and development. But again, at this major conference very few artists took the floor. The speakers were ministers of culture, they were politicians and other decision-makers at national, regional or local level. The Council of Europe set up initiatives paralleling that of 'Our creative diversity' and UNESCO's work, and published a report a couple of years ago called 'In from the Margins'. In it, a small group of people – researchers and policymakers – give their views of Europe and where they think it is going.

At the beginning it was extremely hard to discern all the diverse trends – Europe is so complex. Looking closer, we were disappointed with much we saw in the cultural sector. Cultural policies were largely sectoral – people were talking to themselves. They were working in music, in theatre, in the visual arts, museums or literature, but there was very little interaction between them. What interaction did take place was in the margins, not in mainstream policymaking. We also discovered an incredible amount of negative cooperation, with people joining forces to defend their vested interests; they would hold onto established practices, reluctant to explore new ways of working and doing things.

We saw the struggle for subsidies, with art institutions being almost forced to display a lack of solidarity towards each other because they would be rivals for the same funds. And the people who showed least solidarity were artists themselves. Politicians were more willing to be open-minded and see what needed to be done, but it is very difficult

to alter structures when everybody is fighting for their own interests. Another thing to emerge clearly was that institutions were taking an increasing share of public funds, leaving less money for innovative projects, for research and development – for the development of ideas. Everybody is busily engaged in projects and productions. While institutions are expected to produce more and more, they are also expected to be more accountable for what they are doing. That is not in itself a bad thing, but if it turns into a rat race I think we will all be the losers.

What also struck us was that from an American perspective, say, Europe is becoming more and more of a museum. We are investing a great deal in cultural heritage, which is important for all of us, but the creativity of today's artists is suffering as a result. This is a problem. How do we strike a balance between heritage policies, institutional support policies and support for creativity, innovation, research and development? This is of great importance to the vitality of the arts and culture.

We noticed that the arts and culture were increasingly being used to remedy the ills of our societies. According to politicians in Brussels, and perhaps to your own government leaders, the arts are generating employment, they are good for social cohesion, they forge links between different groups of people, and so on. That is all very well, but these initiatives have not come from the arts – it is the politicians who have made the arts sector look at factors related to economic development. This casts the arts once again in the role of passive onlookers waiting to see what the government will ask them to do.

But we also saw very many fine projects. Since the Second World War, the arts sector has undergone extraordinary growth. We have more theatres, museums and symphony orchestras, more arts schools and universities than ever before in human history – and therefore more opportunities. There are more artists now than ever before. The number of artists in most European countries has grown, just in the past twenty years, by some twenty to twenty-five per cent. What emerged very clearly from our study was the incredible amount of creativity that exists in Europe.

But people who are trained to be creative, to think differently, to cross boundaries, will change patterns of development wherever they work, whether or not it is in the cultural sector. This is something that has not been discussed very much yet in Europe – the creativity that exists not just in the arts sector but throughout society. A few years ago Ruth Townsend published a very interesting study of people in Britain who had been trained professionally as artists but worked in other sectors, and showed the innovative work they were doing. This is another thing that needs to be examined – how the arts can contribute to society, for instance through artists who at some point in their lives work for companies or in policy-making.

We discovered some very interesting new partnerships being created between the public and private sectors. I am not referring to simple sponsorship – ‘We are poor artists from the arts community: could you give us some money?’. No. I think it is time to put an end to this. Instead we need to develop partnerships and debates. Julia Rowntree is the Director of the LIFE festival in London. To help finance this international theatre festival she has involved the business community in funding without logos and without any sense of it being sponsorship money. She stresses to the business sector that artists and actors make strategic decisions, in much the same way as businessmen. They have to build scenarios in order to see choices, test values, take risks and go forward. I think building partnerships of this kind is extremely important for the future, to ensure that we do not go begging either from the government or from the private sector.

We are partners in planning, and we are on an equal footing when discussing development policies. I do not think that any profession, whether in Europe or at global level, can afford to work in isolation. Given the pace of technological development and economic integration, and the existence of international agreements such as GATT, no-one can afford to be outside. There are important problems to be solved, and people from different sectors must cooperate to solve them. But of course each participant must preserve their integrity and identity while doing so. This cooperative spirit is extremely important for all professions. It is untenable for one sector – the arts – to remain separate from the rest, occasionally emerging from its ghetto to beg for money. The arts must open up, reviving the tradition that belongs to its history. In the Renaissance, artists worked in a wide variety of professions and collaborated with the Church and with secular leaders. And! I do not think it harmed the arts. But at the end of this millennium, specialisation has reached such a pitch in the arts, as it has in other professions, that we need to open up and rethink our role and the way we operate.

If you would like to read about the results of the research conducted at the Council of Europe, and the findings of our European travels, I would invite you to order our book *In from the Margins* from the Council of Europe and *Our creative diversity* from UNESCO, both of which may give you some new ideas about where we are going and suggest some possible venues.