

“Why and how to engage in European cultural debates? What actions for what needs?”

Speech by Ferdinand Richard, at la Friche La Belle de Mai, at 9.30am, 25th October 2008

We all know, throughout the continent, that arts and culture have suffered two kinds of subjugation:

- that of chauvinism, for the service of national prestige, for communication of governments, heads of state, local executives.
- that of monopolies, for an optimisation of the industrial exploitation of cultural products, the calibration of the public, control of the contents, development of tourism.

These exploitations have been visible on every level of our cultural policies, as much in the area of public financing as in the redevelopment of territory, as much in the distribution of cultural products as in the treatment reserved for professionals, as much in the silent acceptance of a two-tier Culture as in its imprisonment within a schizophrenic bubble.

These uses have above all contributed to that which has impeded any political advances of a concerted continental cultural action.

European Culture has still not freed itself from the proscriptions of member states or global industries, and we can but note that these institutions have barely had a hold on this protected domain.

However, today everything is changing drastically.

There are many of us who feel the vibrations of the mountain, resulting from other seismic shifts that we would prefer were outside of our cosy world, when they are in themselves emerging and submerging of culture.

We are afraid of everything, of the disappearance of the Ministry of Culture, of the dematerialisation of mediums, of the privatisation of information, the fading of languages, sounds, colours, odours, of world poverty, a faceless Europe...

The best way of curbing anxiety-inducing factors is to look into their eyes. Let's stare at our three fears head-on:

1) The process of European integration, slow but persistent, makes the old competition between nation states inadmissible. Europe can no longer be the accumulation of more or less compatible national cachets. Tomorrow, the only project politically possible will be for Europe to become an equitable network of communities, areas of populations and initiatives, an abundant platform of multilateral exchanges combining the cultural rights of individuals, and cultural, ethnic, geographic, professional, economic and denominational diversities, including some of its demonetised aspects. Another exchange is possible.

2) The profound transformation of the financing of culture and the arts is certainly more worrying. It results from the new role, obviously different depending on the case, that each sleeping partner wishes to allocate to them. Funding for some, public works contracts and invitations to tender for others, the new order in the search for financing blurs words, procedures, assessments and legality. What are truly clean revenues? Is it legal to build up working capital? Can a contract with the European Union be regarded as a letter of credit? Is an organisation a firm? Is an artist an entrepreneur? Who is a professional artist? Today each sleeping partner, each country has its stance with regard to these subjects, but in any event, the search for and management of financing will pass through a European “administrative culture” that, far from being merely an increase of bureaucracy, must also be considered in terms of its ethical, and sustainable qualities, and its openness to partnerships. We are not only on an individual quest for the goodwill of princes and patrons; we collectively construct and assume the financing process.

3) The unbearable cynicism inflicted by rich countries on poor countries rightfully results in anger. Cultural cooperation, badly understood, can generate scorching flashback, and many among us wonder about its usefulness. Of course we have myriad examples proving that culture is the sine qua non of a good policy of stability, but on the condition that it rids itself of its cultural diplomacy that is sometimes vague, sometimes shocking. In order to no longer generate violent reactions, a new cooperation must try to be European and support the same values that we wish to put into effect on the continent: sustainable exchange, multilateral relations, sustainable structuring, accessibility, community focus, local economy, openness, transversality.

Responding to these three fears requires strategic willingness. Each of us will express our own, but we can already single out five characteristics:

1) We must integrate into a multilateral territorial logic, and while doing so, we'll strongly emphasize this paradox: the pertinent territorial level, the community, will increasingly be Europe, through its policy of interregional structural support, its proposition to reorganise territorial grades (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics), through the necessary reform of its institutions. And here I dare an incongruous remark: the elections at the European Parliament are territorial elections.

2) We must acquire recognition from other sectors (economy/employment, social affairs, rights/citizenship, diplomacy/cooperation) through broad programmes. We will experience culture as a systematic, transversal proposition, a perpetual journey, an endless transformation across all landscapes, all practices, all languages, and not as finite heritage, stored in a numbered safe. Therefore, we must improve our visibility, translate our jargon, increase our political weight.

3) We must definitely put an end to the logic of national prestige or local prestige (the latter merely being the transposition of the former), which all too often reduces artistic programming to a suicidal competition between court jesters, never taking into consideration the desires of the people, with no respect for the time of the artist or the life of his work, an orgy of miscellaneous projects more or less completed, made-over packaging cluttering up our lounge's mantelpiece.

4) It would be best that we immediately resist global pressure, particularly during international negotiations, by collectively contributing to the development of a body of rules, contracts and laws that can be used in the world arena. An unrewarding and tedious task it's true, but there is nothing more cultural than the development of law, a summary of customs and principles.

5) We have to rethink autonomous international cultural cooperation, freed from cultural diplomacies, starting at a European level. Of course, we must invent European cultural centres based on new objectives, new modes of functioning, built around companionship between cultural structures, but we must also rethink the directions of cultural capitals, the Anna Lindh Foundation, support networks, funding mobility, research into European cultural policy, etc. In short, what cooperation do we want and what for?

The programmes to be undertaken are many, remain to be invented, and I would not be so pretentious as to draw up a list of them here, for it would be bound to be incomplete. We can however imagine that they would belong to two possible families:

1) The first family brings together all that would contribute to create spaces for cooperation to define the elements of the "cultural doctrine" of the European project, and, most particularly to draw up the delicate equilibrium between peripheries and centres, consumption and practice, education and economy, partnerships and singularities, autonomy and public support. Of course we must associate our political candidates, our public institutions with this and question them about their European cultural commitment. Citizens' voices must also be allowed to emerge.

2) The second family brings together everything that will contribute to training staff (particularly in France) capable of integrating, mastering and influencing all the structural programmes, be they directly open to culture or not, along with all the planning or decision-making centres dealing with culture, directly or not, and all the networks of public institutions. From this point of view, and compared to other sectors (environment, scientific research, social initiatives), we present a certain weakness in human resources, having oriented our professional training towards production, management and communication areas, and not enough towards surveying and overseeing different financing methods.

To conclude, and despite the dark clouds on the horizon, what is conveniently called the current crisis, both global and sectorial, to me seems to also establish for our sector the opportunity for historic change.

I do not doubt for a moment that European transformation, despite its uncomfortable periods, can bring together works and territories, populations and poetry to their advantage.

We have the unique opportunity to bounce back towards the world, to master a minimum the new directions of cultural policy and to directly participate in these important decisions.

It is at this price that we could reinforce the quality and reception of artists' demands, and save what contemporary creation could be.

The rhythm and the direction of this transmutation depends on us.

Ferdinand Richard, October 2008.