



The European Venue for Green Ideas

SOCIETY, MEDIA AND CULTURE

## RECREATING EUROPE: CULTURE RETURNS TO THE EU STAGE

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**Culture has regained prominence in recent years within the discourse of the EU and its institutions. In the face of euroscepticism, EU officials have turned to culture to promote European values and enhance citizens' feeling of a shared identity. But should culture really be shouldered with ensuring the EU's survival? Live arts show that the real value of culture for the EU is its ability to challenge entrenched dogmas, thinking patterns, mentalities, and customs. In an age where traditional media struggle to keep up with the outside world, live art can help us comprehend and accept the complexity of the reality we live in. [1]**

Recently, EU officials have come to realise that the strength of the European project lies not only in its economic but also in its human dimension. In a [November communication](#), the European Commission looked to culture as a vehicle to strengthen European identity and its citizens' shared values. The Commission also embraced culture as a tool to reinforce the EU's global influence. In the recent European Commission's [proposal](#) for the EU budget for 2021 to 2027, culture is explicitly associated with social and democratic values, inclusion, and civil society. This emphasis represents quite a shift from the previous strategy that squeezed culture into the overarching ambition for 'growth and jobs'. The EU's new engagement with culture may have some merit: contemporary live art is both inherently social and encourages new ways of thinking – two things that may just help the EU overcome its existential crisis.

### Real world outside our imagination

Today, digital technology channels enormous parts of people's interaction with the outside world. Digital tools tend to enable a granular information consumption as people receive smaller pieces of information in greater amounts about subjects that already matter to them. This makes it easy for

people to ignore, often unwittingly, or omit facts that contradict their beliefs and focus on those details that reinforce them.

The digital world thus gives us access to the material we want and a set of tools to sculpt and maintain our comprehension of reality as we believe it is, a mechanism often referred to as ‘confirmation’ and which is particularly present in complex and emotionally powerful issues. How we make sense of the world, our inner picture of the ‘real’ world, is increasingly created in a silo with little exposure to other ideological frameworks. This narrow pattern of thinking is exacerbated by today’s hyper-specialised economy. The model based on standardisation and specialisation of jobs and tasks has spread to many non-industrial domains such as health care, legal services, and IT, to name but a few [more on specialisation in the digital economy]. This only reinforces the siloisation and fragmentation of our societies.

The lack of interaction between different parts of society, and the intolerance that comes with it, paralyzes society’s ability to carry out structural change. Whereas universal mobilisation could shake up dominant hierarchies, be they gender based or ethnic, accelerate action on climate change, or reform social structures, the ties through which to build it are weaker than in the past. Progressive forces have too often failed to propose a tangible solution to break through this fragmented state of affairs, which in turn has proven fertile ground for simplified reactionary discourses.

“ *contemporary performance can stimulate new means of understanding one’s own self and one’s relationship to wider society* ”

In the wake of the economic crisis that started in 2008, Europe finds itself in a state of unemployment and precariousness, increasing inequality, and fear and intolerance towards migrants. This generalised uncertainty inspires distrust in European institutions and disappointment with the European idea as such. While the media has the potential to equip people with the capacity to understand ‘the other’, it frequently plays the opposite role, preferring to reinforce stereotypes and pursue commercial aims. The prospect of a real conversation – let alone common and effective solutions – is being buried between the multiple silos Europeans are trapped in.

What we really need today are the instruments, the time, and the space to challenge deeply rooted patterns of behavior, worldviews, and even aesthetics. To get out of these well-worn paths of reasoning we need a push, a shock, a sort of a radical factor, which would touch our innermost feelings and emotions, a powerful eraser for the preconceptions and prejudices in our heads.

### The rare chance to be “here and now”

What do the contemporary live arts have to do with this? The point here is not that contemporary live arts tell us what to think. Instead, they are especially relevant for showing us our own potential to think differently. The arts do not bring the change, but rather make it possible.

In our highly digitised world, the specificity of live arts lies in its unique power to place us in the ‘here and now’, where we are exposed to a reality at a given moment, without any intermediary means of communication, without breaks, pauses, possibilities to zoom in and out, rewatch and rewind. Live performance is impossible to censor once it reaches the stage. One can only try to stop it physically, but then one would unwittingly become part of a new performance, of which the ultimate message could not be controlled.

Whereas everything that is shown on a screen is made to be watched in a box, a squared space, a performance can happen in many different places – on the street, in a shopping mall, in a library, on a train, to name but a few. Contemporary performance embraces a variety of shapes, forms, and means and operates within a diversity of time frames, from an action repeated every five minutes to one that unfolds over 24 hours. This is in contrast to the increasingly standardised timespans of cultural goods such as TV series episodes. The ability of contemporary performance to break these limits challenges the conventional means of creating aesthetics and can thus disrupt deep-seated customs or ways of thinking in unexpected ways.

Today, the European idea can only survive and thrive if people can find a way to overcome their biases. Art is perhaps one of the last resorts to help guide us onto the track of questioning received wisdom. The famous Serbian London-based artist Marina Abramovic spent six hours in a room with 72 different objects, including a rose, bread, a scalpel, and a loaded gun, and allowed passersby to do whatever they wished with her body using these objects. Her clothes were cut from her, she was touched intimately, someone slashed her throat, the loaded gun was even aimed at her head... This performance, called Rhythm 0, questions the self-preservation instinct and reveals the limits of our self-permissiveness in an abrupt way, which passersby would have not have otherwise encountered in their daily lives. Though abstract, this is just one example of how contemporary performance can stimulate new means of understanding one's own self and one's relationship to wider society.

Performing arts and their transformative potential are not only for an elitist bubble, the usual suspects with the means and training to consume the arts. Contemporary live performance also happen on the outskirts of cities, in prisons, in refugee camps, 'problematic' neighbourhoods, hospitals, retirement homes, schools, and on the doorstep of public institutions. Two projects by France-based Le Phénix, 'Nickel' and 'Haute soudure', involved young unemployed people, mostly from deprived communities, many of whom had never had contact with live art practices before. They embarked on professional training hoping to get a job at a factory that also involved a performance (a result of a partnership among Le Phénix, recruitment companies, and local industry). The project revealed the participants' own potential to create something they had never imagined being able to do. It unlocked enhanced self-confidence and a changed perception of realities at large, which turned out to be less black and white and more encouraging than it seemed. For European society today, which, across all communities, can seem gripped by insecurity and fear of the unknown, such cultural activities could play an important part in turning this around.

## Compassion through understanding and not understanding

However, contemporary performance's ability to disrupt conventions is not necessarily sufficient to generate fresh ideas and a revolution of the mind. Unsurprisingly, contemporary arts can be hard to understand, or can induce boredom or feelings of confusion. Spending a couple of hours contemplating a group of 25 people doing nothing but run around the stage, or participating in a performance which is all about holding hands is not an eye-opening experience for everyone. Spending money and time for something that makes no sense to us could be frustrating, to say the least. However, such experiences, if they are reflected upon and discussed, which often happens within different after-show formats, may induce curiosity ("how can anyone like it, if I don't?") and encourage tolerance, patience, and a readiness to accept the existence and even relevance of something we do not understand. Experiencing but not understanding a piece of art can be valuable in itself, as it challenges both our emotions and our brains. In the long run, it helps us to be self-critical and to place ourselves in a liminal zone, where everything is possible and everything is subject to reflection and change.

“ *The shift in the EU’s culture discourse, marked by a fresh recognition of the non-economic role of culture in the European integration process, cannot go unnoticed* ”

Ultimately live arts have the power to create connections, understanding, and even compassion between groups that are seemingly impossible to bring together. ‘The Opponents’ is a music theatre project by Opera Theatre Amsterdam. The performance started with a weekly workshop which involved refugees and those who would rather not give them a place in their neighbourhood or in their country at all. Every participant got a voice, through choruses based on their stories and texts. This process led to a series of performances in Theater De Meervaart, amongst others, in which both groups interacted with each other on stage, separated by a large rotating wall. The performance itself was not the end goal: the ultimate aim of ‘The Opponents’ was to build a space for a type of dialogue which does not happen within any other structure provided by the current social and political frameworks.

## Europe turns to culture

Where does Europe fit into this picture? First, the concept of European identity has been discussed for a few decades now while societies have changed dramatically and new communities have been formed. Yet it is still not clear what the concept means today and whether it reflects the complexity and multiplicity of European societies. Second, European integration is a complex and multifaceted process, bringing together a diversity of identities and mentalities, histories and stories, cultures and heritage. Ultimately, it is about designing a space where this plurality can be embraced, accommodated, and where conversations can overcome deadlock. Such a space inevitably requires not only an openness to converse with the ‘other’, but also an ability to compromise, rethink and challenge some parts of our own identities. Developing such a space, sort of a grey zone, should be top of the agenda for pro-European leaders and progressive forces. And live performance remains one of the most powerful tools available for this process.

The shift in the EU’s culture discourse, marked by a fresh recognition of the non-economic role of culture in the European integration process, cannot go unnoticed. The proposal for the future 2021-2027 Creative Europe programme, the EU funding scheme for arts and culture, states its aim as “promoting European culture and values that contribute to the identity of our Union”. The Commission’s communication on the New European Agenda for Culture, which the Commission itself denotes as ‘ambitious’, goes on to outline the multiple values that culture brings to the EU: not only related to strengthening the European identity and promoting the EU’s value, but also fostering active citizenship and intercultural dialogue. If we are serious about sustaining the European Union, then the latter two, about engaging citizens and overcoming otherness, should outweigh the other objectives.

[1] *This article expresses the author’s own views and not those of her organisation.*