

# Arts: What's left?

Valeria Graziano

Where are the arts located within Left cultures? The “creative industries” paradigm that gathered momentum in Europe during the 1990s and 2000s is currently being dismantled. Such policy model – sometimes also called ‘cultural neo-liberalism’ – was based upon the belief that creativity could be a source of growth, both understood in social and economic terms. Many in the field saluted this as an overcoming of the traditional Left suspicion toward the arts as being elitist.

Creativity is, after all, a desirable human capacity, something that everyone possesses, and the hope was that the arts could find a new place in the social democratic process. However, the belief that creativity can be simultaneously organised under the predicament of the social *and* the economic is not a neutral one, as the two in fact operate according to antagonistic principles. The ‘creative industries’ materialised in a specific agenda that mixed the shrinking public provision of culture, education and arts with the expansion of a new paradigm of labour made of flexible subjects who should *enjoy* work as an opportunity for self-expression.

At present, a European vision for the future of its societies and its cultures is lacking. While the narrative coming from official politics is contradictory and fragmented, revolving around key words such as ‘austerity’ and ‘self-reliance’, a new wave of social movements has been agitating the continent from *elsewhere*. Millions of people from Spain to Tunisia, from the UK to Belgium, from Egypt to Italy, from Germany to Greece, have recently activated in the name of an ultimatum for *alternatives*.

While the demands focused on different issues in each specific case (democratic representation, education, energy policies, financial strategies, gender discrimination, etc.), all recent movements addressed the *form* as well as the *content* of politics. What these protests share is a common sense that a process of impoverishment is going on: the malaise started with sparse symptoms at a symbolic level (for instance, the growing xenophobia and populism in many EU countries), while now it has revealed a defined contour that impacts the very material conditions of existence and reproduction of society (privatisation of public provisions; financialisation of life).

Within this scenario, opposing the neoliberal cuts and the populist rhetoric against publicly supported arts, culture and education cannot be divorced by an opposition to the groups that benefit from such hostile policies. This opposition is what the social movements find lacking in the European Left, found guilty of keeping its foot into many camps. Will the arts position themselves differently or will they mirror such pattern of behaviour?

Many within the arts have been adopting the soft strategy of mixing ‘excellence and innovation’, ‘social impact’ and ‘outreach’ with ‘financial sustainability’ (which means the ability to attract private sponsors) and “organisational proficiency” (the ability to externalise and outsource labour) during the phase of the creative industries. It appears that this will no longer be a workable option. As argued by Andrew Ross, Stefano Harney, Angela McRobbie, among many others, neoliberal management and governance have become interested not only in creative products, but in creative processes too: for many it will be increasingly difficult to operate ‘under the radar’ as the rules of the game are being rewritten.

Thus, it seems time to revisit – yet once again! – the narratives through which cultural workers may advocate for what they practice. To rise up in the name of a commitment to an art form or in defence of its excellence would probably fail, as it would not engage the many for whom the arts are not a relevant cultural currency. To plea in the name of a professional(ised) group seems equally dubious; this model has been going bankrupt for some time now, as the membership of trade unions declines and professional organisations fail to include younger and precarious constituencies.

I would like to suggest that a sustainable standpoint could probably only emerge out of a commitment to those whom are being impoverished – both materially and at the level of the imagination. The weak inclusivity standpoint today appears shakier than ever: we are not all in this together, as one popular slogan from the UK reads. The more the arts try to keep everybody happy, to appeal to everyone and every position, the more they risk to become insignificant and to dissipate all the knowledges and sensibilities that have been accumulated and still circulate in the cultural sector as we know it. Civil stability cannot be the ultimate goal. We must be open to the possibility that democracy and justice come first, and we will be ready to embrace conflict if need should arise.

Coming to terms with the possibility of conflict does not mean to perform rioting rebellious gestures necessarily. It may be more important to fight against the introduction of a new managerial requirement from the funders than to include one more radical piece in an underfunded programme. The pedagogy of conflict includes a whole spectrum of radical diplomacy, smuggling, passing, translating, institutional squatting and subvertising. Most of all it implies a disposition for looking for allies in unexpected places, for building solidarity and relations of care where there are none.

And as for the form this process may take, this will require a strong imagination around the role of all constituencies, of all those participating in the never-ending process of making culture(s) contemporary. Otherwise, any proposal will be perceived as paternalist from the point of view of the new collective subjectivities and common intelligences that are already dwelling in the name of alternatives.

Formats of direct democracy and mutual aid will play an important part in this process. Many people are drawn to the arts because of their ability to speak of the possible, to offer a space for critical thinking and a different modality of social encounter. In the face of shrinking support (both economic and discursive) for the arts and culture, it is vital to imagine different forms of ‘*social enterprises*’, while remaining extremely suspicious of the hidden meanings of both these terms. Hence, the downtime of the crisis can become a time to become more *artisanal*, as proposed by *Colectivo Situaciones*, to reinvent the practice of social and creative cooperation that dare to operate according to a self-determined logic of valorisation in a scale of 1:1.

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