

I.

Your Royal Highnesses, laureates, guests: welcome. Today, I am honoured to share with you the deliberations of our jury last autumn, when we discussed laureates for the ECF Princess Margriet Award for Culture. I am sure my fellow jury members remember it well.

Over two days, 18 and 19 November we selected four exemplary laureates who represent different generations, European regions and cultural approaches, yet who also share similar values and a desire to make today's Europe a better place for everyone. These are people whose minds are open to divergent ideas and who are capable of imagining how *we* can make sense of, and improve, our common social reality.

Jury members: do you remember that we asked ourselves who exactly 'we' are in Europe?

Today's populist leaders are eager to claim the voice of 'the people', saying they speak for a silent majority. The question is: does this majority not also include a myriad of minorities? And more importantly, are these minorities silent, or are they in fact suppressed? Maybe 'we' are the concerned citizens shaking our heads as we witness the rise

of populist bullies. In view of their xenophobic provocations, it is all too apparent that the consensus of inclusivity that many of us hold so dear is out of reach for very many others, particularly those who hardly dare hope for a future free from hardship.

These groups that are already economically, socially and politically threatened are being pitted against one another. But could culture perhaps play a pivotal role in countering the policies of unequal distribution of wealth, and other causes of fragmentation? If so, which voices among our extraordinarily diverse nominees would be strong enough to broach such a difficult topic, with its complex questions of who can define a notion of 'us', or map the shifting associations that unite citizens and embolden them to embrace multiple constellations of 'we' and 'us'?

With these thoughts in mind, the jury examined a remarkable range of nominations that included cultural voices and critical thinkers from across Europe, unanimously choosing four. I would like to start by introducing Aslı Erdoğan and Navid Kermani. Later in the ceremony I will introduce Marina Naprushkina and Luc Mishalle.

Aslı Erdoğan is a writer and columnist whose literary oeuvre includes novels, novellas and short stories, all of which engage readers as they display humanity in all its fragility. In her literary and non-fiction writing, Aslı raises her defiant voice on behalf of and together with the oppressed, calling violence by its name and illuminating a vision of society based on non-violence and political and cultural inclusivity. In light of Aslı's treatment by the authorities, which mirrors the persecution of innumerable other writers, journalists and intellectuals, to honour her is to stand with her and her peers, to offer a gesture of solidarity in the face of adversity and in defence of humanity.

Navid Kermani's life and work comprise many facets. As a writer he has produced novels, media reports, plays and children's books and is known as a literary cosmopolitan who is never satisfied with simplistic answers or simple identities. His fiction deals with existential subjects including death, rapture and art. As an academic, Navid has displayed a detailed historical understanding of how eastern and western intellectual undercurrents intertwine. As a journalist, he has offered insightful perspectives on the acceptance of migrants, countering divisive views on refugee issues. Navid's exceptional contribution to cultural and political debate challenges increasingly extremist narratives

of discrimination and racism, arguing instead for a more nuanced view of religions and a greater solidarity in the face of fragmentation.

## II.

Since 2007, the multimedia projects of Berlin-based artist Marina Naprushinka have been organised by the imaginary Office for Anti-Propaganda. From the perspective of her own youth in Belarus she examines the structures of authoritarian systems and investigates the critical role of culture in effecting political change. In her work, which includes video, installations and newspapers, a recurring question is how art can inspire political imagination and create a social basis that includes people outside of the traditional contemporary arts audience. Marina was selected particularly in light of her project *Neue Nachbarschaft*, a self-organising community in the Berlin district of Moabit that employs culture on a major scale to create a social fabric that crosses cultural boundaries in a participatory, non-paternalistic way. Self-empowerment is at the heart of *Neue Nachbarschaft*, and the project is an outstanding example of how artistic engagement and creative activism can reveal the veiled control mechanisms that newcomers

encounter, question prejudices and define new alliances. In this exemplary new European neighbourhood, old and new Berliners can discover collaborative ways of living together and develop art's potential contribution to a shared future in Europe.

Saxophonist and composer Luc Mishalle juggles many roles, most of which converge in his artistic directorship of MET-X. Based in Brussels, this group of music makers composes and performs music and provides educational programmes that are inspired by a range of musical genres and traditions, from brass to folk, from electronic to jazz, and involving musicians from all generations. Luc's projects are always about community building, whether in Brussels neighbourhoods, across Europe or in North or West Africa. With decades of experience, in openness of spirit and with quiet modesty, Luc taps into feelings of belonging and inclusion to discover shape and affirmative resonance in Europe's shifting social composition. His work and music transcend borders between genres and cultures.

Honoured guests, we would not presume to claim that culture alone can rectify inequality around the world. Since the jury met last year, there have been many set backs and injustices but also some signs in hope, for example in

the elections in the Netherlands, Austria and most recently France.

And above all, the tireless efforts of cultural beacons such as Asli, Navid, Luc and Marina and the people they work with, show us that giving up hope is not an option: they breathe life into the idea that culture can contribute to an opening of minds to that which is different, without falling prey to fragmentation. The European Cultural Foundation, my fellow jury members and I hope that this award will amplify their already astonishing work, and that it will aid a gradual and wider appreciation of culture beyond its preconceived limits.

Thank you.