

# The European Pavillon

an initiative by the European Cultural Foundation

## Background and introduction

In 1953, one year before he set up the European Cultural Foundation, Denis de Rougemont wrote ‘Habeas Animam’: a text in which he stresses the importance of supporting and promoting European cultural initiatives to restore European self-confidence. “If a sense of common destiny is awakened among Europeans,” he notes, “most of the obstacles that exist today will seem easier to overcome or even vanish, inasmuch as they consist of prejudice, partisan blindness, unfounded mistrust and, above all, ignorance of the real situation.” For De Rougemont, it is thus only through a cultural awakening that Europe will find a new coherence and a way forward, enabling it to play a major role in the defense of peace and democracy for the generations to come.

Nearly seventy years later, after decades of European policies more concerned with economic growth, the essence and value of Europe as first and foremost a cultural community and dynamic public sphere is still underestimated. The idea of a Europe based on solidarity, mutual respect between people and cultural cooperation across borders, nationalities, cultural differences, where citizens feel they belong to the same demos, is struggling to emerge. Instead, the national imaginary maintains its hold on sentiments and identities.

## A cultural statement

With the idea of a ‘European Pavilion’, the European Cultural Foundation wants to challenge prevailing national perspectives. Together with other foundations and partners, we are keen to launch a thought-provoking arts initiative and cultural statement: one that imagines cross-border European perspectives and addresses the

way people, institutions and media feel and view Europe. We believe that imagination is key to opening up new perspectives and narratives or, in the words of Princess Laurentien: “to inspiring us to question our own convictions and gain space for new insights.”<sup>1</sup>

### A Pavilion?

Throughout history, the meaning and function of the pavilion has varied greatly: from a tent, a self-standing construction erected in aristocratic gardens, to a suburban dwelling, or indeed, an exhibition space. It is a temporary or permanent structure that provides a shelter and a space for encounter, reflection and experimentation.

In the (western) context of arts and culture, the pavilions of the Venice Biennale have become emblems of national representation. This principle is reminiscent of the model of universal exhibitions inherited from the 19th century. These exhibitions provided a stage on which nations displayed and promoted their identities in a global and commercial context. In the world order that has since emerged, the nation-state has become so deeply embedded in our thinking that alternative forms of identity-building and political representation have become practically unimaginable and therefore, unavailable.

Whether the Venice Biennale and its pavilions are a public arena that encourage visitors to think about what such a national representation entails or not, is part of growing debate.<sup>2</sup> The model seems to have become out of touch and criticised by those who embrace collaboration across borders and celebrate multiple identities instead of the national gaze only. On the other hand it is an easy fixed model for those who use culture to celebrate ‘our nation / people first’.

All in all, the idea of a pavilion as a space devoid of a fixed function, a place open to possibilities where people can meet, discuss, exhibit, imagine different perspectives, remains interesting. It is no coincidence that the pavilion has inspired many artists and architects. One of them, conceptual artist Dan Graham, said about his pavilion that they “derive their meaning from the people who look at themselves and others,

and who are being looked at themselves”. Such an approach that combines transparency and reflectiveness also invites us to envision the pavilion as a space where everyone is encouraged to look at themselves: critically, productively, imaginatively.

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<sup>1</sup> HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, opening remarks at the ECF Princess Margriet Award ceremony held in Amsterdam on 2 October 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the history of the Venice Biennial, many artists and organizers have been critically addressing the national dimension of the pavilion. We can for instance mention Hans Haacke’s Germania (1993), the provocative decision by the artist Santiago Sierra to prohibit the entry of any non-Spanish national to the Spanish Pavilion (2003), the establishment of the Research Pavilion and the NSK State Pavilion (2017). The most recent example of this would be the decision of the Mondriaan Fund, for the 2021 Art Biennale, to leave the Dutch Pavilion in the heart of the Giardini, and offer the premise to Estonia.