

SPEECH HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands

PMA Award ceremony, Brussels 18 March 2014

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Your Royal Highness,

Madame la Commissaire, Mrs Vassiliou,

Excellencies, distinguished guests and members of the award jury

and especially, dear Laureates,

In the 20-some years that I've lived in Brussels, this building has always been one of my favourites. I love the ambition at the time of conception nearly a century ago: a space to make art accessible to as many people as possible, while maintaining the highest quality standards. Its immensity is cleverly hidden and it brings together different worlds. Bozar allows for the individuality of different cultural expressions while maintaining one architectural coherence. So this space shows that creativity, quality and artistic diversity can all live together under one roof. If I translated this to a European context: that a shared narrative does not exclude the possibility of different viewpoints and perspectives (*and vice versa*). And this hall of course feels like an ancient Greek *agora*, a gathering place where crowds of people would assemble to exchange goods and discuss all kinds of topics – from business to politics, from the daily news to the universe and the divine: in other words a common *public space*.

This notion of an agora as a public gathering space is a fascinating one, particularly in today's world. Today, *space* has so many different meanings and the boundaries of what's public and private are constantly blurred, mainly by our own doing. Are we not, more than ever before, living in different spaces in parallel? We interact with others through digital spaces, through institutional contacts and in the space of our everyday lives. As if each of these individual spaces aren't confusing enough in and of themselves, we are often completely at a loss on how to connect these different spaces while maintaining some kind of coherence.

Against this background, I sometimes wonder why we focus so much on the widening gap between the people of Europe, *demos*, and the institutions of power, *kratos*, that are meant to represent them. Don't get me wrong – these and other fundamental gaps are real – such as the geographical gaps between north and south and west and east in Europe. But if we are indeed living in different spaces, the vehicles of power are much more than the formal institutions such as parliament, the European Commission or national institutions for that matter. If we focus solely on the formal institutions of Europe we tend to overlook the value of the informal undercurrents of European *demos*, the unquantifiable currency of cultural interaction and the way people organise themselves and relate to one another outside the institutions, heightened by the uncontrollable forces that the digital channels of communication and interaction offer us. In other words, in this day and age, the traditional notion of *kratos* may not be the only reference point.

So rather than focus on the widening gaps, let's focus on the endless opportunities to connect people across Europe to fill those gaps. To do so, we need spaces to exchange experiences and develop shared narratives. And we of course all know that a narrative doesn't just develop by its own – it demands the commitment of many different voices, willing to take on different roles to contribute to the narrative. These different voices need to be producers as well as consumers of information; active participants as well as the audience.

So what's the narrative?

Europe as it is currently talked about is mainly a community of economic interests and partly a community of values such as peace, rule of law, social welfare, solidarity, human rights... But what it is not – or not enough - is a community of images, shared references, shared feelings and shared dreams. In other words, all that culture can help deliver. Culture can help bridge gaps by the very nature of the language it speaks and the emotions and ideas it expresses – of love, survival and freedom. This is where the European Cultural Foundation strives to enable spaces between organisations and individuals under our motto "connecting people through arts and culture". We support individuals and organisations that can help develop

“imagined communities”. This imagined community can only be shaped by a shared - not a single! - *narrative*. A shared narrative precisely combines unity and diversity. It is grounded in a deep conviction that we all share because we all experience it: multiple identities are possible. And we also know that multiple identities are desirable because we become enriched individuals precisely because of the combination of inputs. And actually European citizens are convinced of it: a clear majority feels that in a near future they will be at the same time a national *and* a European citizen; and this feeling of “double identity”, among and despite so many signs of declining European commitment, is rather comforting. One remembers the Orwell’s famous aphorism in *1984*: “Who commands the past commands the future; who commands the present commands the past”. Without a shared narrative, Europe will command neither its past nor its present, nor its future...

Laureates

It is no coincidence that the laureates we are celebrating today are re-opening the notion of the old Greek agora as an inclusive public space where different people come together to paint a new horizon. By working with institutions in innovative ways, they are reconnecting the *demos* and the *kratos* again. In Rome, Teatro Valle Occupato and in Zagreb, Teodor Celakoski employ culture as a radical project of learning, posing deep questions about what it means to create a space where people can openly entertain views other than their own, and in so doing, allow new and fresh perspectives. They use culture as a space of possibility to precipitate change; culture as a space to conduct experiments which question old institutional structures that no longer answer to the changing dynamic of Europe’s cosmopolitan societies. Through culture, we can ask new questions, which is necessary to find alternative answers.

We must be realistic and cannot expect culture to heal *all* our economic and social wounds. By distinguishing these two cultural experiences, one in the South of Europe, the other in the East, The jury of the PMA has clearly shown ECF’s commitment to reduce and fight against the growing and worrying geographical gaps within the continent.

Furthermore, Europe requires a careful rebalancing between culture, politics and economics. Or to say it more directly: it requires a cultural community in order to develop the other two: the political one and the economic one.

At the European Cultural Foundation, we seek inspiration from a wide range of sources from within and outside Europe. The wise Chinese philosopher and poet Lao-Tzu – considered the founder of Taoïsm – said that "*The wise man looks into space and knows there is no limited dimensions*". He also warned that *if you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading*. Indeed, to our mind we need cultural expressions to help us look at Europe's challenges and opportunities in a different and open-minded way. But let us never take for granted that everyone else holds that belief as well. The burden of proof lies with us, whether we like it or not.

So let us celebrate PMA laureates Teatro Valle Occupato and Teodor Celakoski and many other outstanding organisations and individuals for transmitting the power of culture so sharply, thoughtfully and inclusively. Thank you for the inspiration we so need!

Thank you.