

A Different Balance

*Debate attached to the Princess Margriet Award, The Egg, Brussels, 19 March 2012
Co-organised with the Flemish-Dutch House, deBuren*

The debate hinged on a question: ‘Politics, economics and culture: a different balance?’ Each of the three speakers hails from one of these three spheres, with some overlap. Charles Esche is a curator and museum director (of Eindhoven’s Van Abbemuseum) whose cultural work is infused with political urgency; Judith Marquand is an economist who argues for the artistry of that discipline; and Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi is a media activist who has launched or contributed to many cutting-edge media outlets, including a pirate radio station.

What was the context of the debate? Physically, the Egg, a former-industrial, now-cultural venue in Brussels; and programmatically, the Princess Margriet Award, ECF’s prize for artists and activists whose work brings greater understanding of Europe’s intercultural landscape. As a prelude to the award ceremony, the debate fleshed out some of the radicalism that marks the choice of laureates for this fourth Award: filmmaker John Akomfrah, and Charles Esche himself.

Emerging Possibilities

Introducing the speakers and the moderator – the ‘wrong word’ for so challenging an interviewer as Dutch journalist Frénk van der Linden – ECF’s Odile Chenal said that the debate should cast light on the role of art in a changing society.

Van der Linden immediately drew from Esche the surprising admission that this renowned curator is unsure if art and culture are the proper spheres in which to pursue his goals. This is because culture tends to have an effect over 30 to 50 years – too long a time-frame for the immediate results he would like to see.

Esche then gave an address on the matter in hand. The economic, cultural and political, he said, are society’s three pillars. They represent three distinct value systems. One pillar, the economic, has become supra-dominant in recent years through neo-liberalism, a doctrine that imposes itself not as an ideological choice but as an inevitability: according to its devotees, there is no other option. What was merely a theoretical proposition 30-odd years ago has solidified into ‘truth’.

Such a simplistic world-view cannot hope to capture our complexity. We must rebalance our public discourse, ask real cultural and political questions such as ‘What *is* democracy?’ The super-complexity, super-diversity of our lives needs to be embraced – at local level, to be effective; and at planetary level, to be meaningful. New possibilities, which we cannot know beforehand, are not to be controlled from above, but to emerge from below.

Renewing Europe

Esche cited art historian TJ Clark's remark that 'modernity is our antiquity'. Museums house the relics, or ruins, of Modernism – and it is time that we started seeing them as such. Instead of being locked up in collections, they should be 'reused'. We need to set the resources free: a certain percentage loaned or sold or given away. This would free up some literal space, but also space inside our heads, enabling society to think itself anew. Museums, which already give access to the public sphere, are well placed to become platforms for collective thinking, and could act as meeting places for different kinds of knowledge.

This collective approach is in line with the way that art is developing. The emphasis on individualism in art is an outdated Modernist concept, and the actual practice of artists is increasingly collaborative.

If the EU had invested in cultural and educational platforms rather than the free market then we would have a different Europe today. Asked to cite a specific measure that could help, Esche proposed a pan-European curriculum for primary schools. Renewing our old Europe – and its value system – would enable it to take part in the emerging one world.

Alternatives to Orthodoxy

Judith Marquand began her address by proposing that we see economics as a form of art and not a deductive science. Like the artist, the economist selects his or her material – specific observations and assumptions – for the challenge at hand.

Unfortunately, the prevailing academic view of economics is that it is a game comprehensible only to the initiated. In contrast, the economist John Maynard Keynes was intensely practical, asking: 'What will work?' Those economists for whom mathematics rather than critical analysis is supreme are not really interested in the way the world works. They exhibit an ignorant worship of science, not realising that science proceeds by a set of hypotheses. This take-over of economics by the neo-liberals began in the 1960s, reaching its height in the 1980s as the ideas of Milton Friedman held sway. It is still very apparent today.

We can seek a general process but not a general theory, and it is here that the audience, the public, begins to have a crucial role. Like artists, economists need to debate their art with others; in their case, other economists, decision-makers, and the general public. The dumbing-down and corruption of the press makes it difficult to have an informed public, but if the options are clearly explained, then people are perfectly capable of contributing constructively. They need to understand that there are always alternatives to the prevailing orthodoxy, and to learn how to praise them.

Over the last thirty years we have witnessed an erosion of the ideal of the public good. On a positive front, there has also been a groundswell of intelligent protest. We need to allow protesters the mechanisms to get their messages across.

No Future?

Franco Berardi delivered a pessimistic prognosis with great gusto. ‘No future,’ sang Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols over three decades ago, and what was a slogan of cultural defiance then is now a statement of fact. Young people are being denied a future.

If he were a politician he would try to understand democracy, and then he would insist, as Charles Esche had done, that the first thing we have to do is invest, invest, invest – in culture, education, and imagination.

The two basic conditions of democracy – producing, voluntarily, the conditions of freedom, and deciding your own destiny – are being undermined in the world today. Media freedom was destroyed in Italy in the 1970s as a large influx of wealth came into the equation. (Italy is, notoriously, the place where bad experiments start.)

When it is dogmatically affirmed that we have no choice, then democracy is dead, an empty word. And when the democratically elected Prime Minister of Greece is forced to resign for seeking a referendum on the prospect of society being destroyed for the sake of the European Central Bank, then democracy has been destroyed in the very place that it was conceived.

Saving Democracy’s Legacy

As the speakers took their seats alongside each other on stage, the talk turned to the ‘serious danger’ (as Marquand observed) of a new fascism emerging. The only way to save the legacy of democracy, they agreed, was to reinvent it. But was it already too late to do so? Berardi thought so, while Esche insisted that we had to believe otherwise, even if this was a delusion.

Despite the long wait for a return on investment in culture, this was the only thing that Esche knew could have an effect. And we have to accelerate that effect.

‘The new dark age has to be faced,’ Berardi said, dismissing the idea that mainstream media could be changed for the better. Instead he puts his faith in the social movements that are bringing solidarity, helping people rediscover the pleasure of being together. According to Marquand, the Murdoch media empire has been exposed as not only pernicious in its views but corrupt in its procedures. She does see some hope in the possibility of creating more publicly funded media outlets that retain their autonomy.



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Overall, the speakers painted a bleak picture of an intellectual climate dominated by neo-liberalism, which is thwarting democracy by insisting on choicelessness while it ravages the economic wellbeing of the vast majority of the public. But the situation is not without hope. Looking five years ahead, Esche predicted that neo-liberalism's value system will no longer be accepted – a development that will create fear in the super-rich, but release energy in others, as the Occupy movement is starting to show.