



# **Invisible Cages: Artistic freedom in the face of cultural labelling policies**

*by Meriam Bousselemi, 2018*

In a three-point joint statement released on November 9, 2017 by the four shortlisted nominees for the *Preis der Nationalgalerie*, which has no monetary value, and which is hosted by the *Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin*, with BMW as main sponsor, the Berlin-based artists: Sol Calero (born in Caracas), Iman Issa (born in Cairo), Jumana Manna (born in Princeton), and Agnieszka Polska (born in Lublin) have openly denounced the prize's emphasis, in press releases and public speeches, on their gender and nationalities rather than the content of their work. The four artists accused the award organisers of a “*self-congratulatory use of diversity as a public-relations tool*”<sup>1</sup>. An altitude that masks the very serious systemic inequalities that prevail in the arts. These inequalities are particularly evident when it comes to artists' lack of remuneration and the celebration of sponsors instead of artistic projects. This uncommon critical stance by the four nominated artists unmasks the ambivalence of current cultural policies, which tend to orient their discourse on art towards promotional or ideological ends, with or without the artist's consent.

Indeed, behind the dominant narratives that celebrate artistic freedom lie variable-geometry paradigms that shift from one situation to another depending on certain extra-artistic interests at stake. Any defence of art's mere self-sufficiency today seems a pure privilege. Everywhere in the world, the standardization of art as an activity necessarily invested in social, political, and economic reality is underway. It is much easier and “safe” to speak about art-and-society, art-and-money, art-and-education, art-and-tourism, art-and-politics, art-and-fun than to speak about art *per se*. This instrumentalization of art for extra-artistic reasons can be positively asserted by the artists themselves when they intend to give their work external purposes other than strict aesthetic value, whether for political engagement or other useful intentions such as an educational purpose. Most of the time, however, the notion of “instrumentalization” has more of a negative connotation. It refers to the misappropriation of artworks for the benefit of heteronomous interests that transcend the artists' deliberate choices. This is a recurrent practice in some cultural institutions, which are more concerned with legitimizing their existence than guaranteeing full freedom to the artists they support or produce.

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<sup>1</sup> CALERO, Sol, ISSA Iman, MANNA, Jumana, POLSKA, Agnieszka, Statement by the Shortlisted Nominees of the 2017 Preis der Nationalgalerie, e-Flux conversations, November 9, 2017. Available at: <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/statement-by-the-shortlisted-nominees-of-the2017-preis-der-nationalgalerie/7315> (Last accessed on 05.01.2024)

The assimilation of art and artists to the marketing logic of consumer societies is taking on unprecedented proportions. It is important to note that the traditional strategies of political instrumentalization of art as a direct form of propaganda, as well as strategies of censorship, seem to have become more complex. At first glance, everything seems possible in the context of economic globalization and the internationalization of artistic production. There's room for every artistic proposal, for every taste, every style, every discourse - or almost. Diversity is the motto of the international artistic and cultural scene. Every artist has the right to emphasize their difference and claim the right to express themselves as they are. It may seem that artists have the freedom to choose what they want to produce. At least, that is what mainstream cultural policies would have them believe, or at least what they are trying to sell. Of course, artists can write whatever they want, more or less. They can draw, sing, and dance to their heart's content, more or less. But they can only be part of active networks if they get the necessary identification, subsidies, and recognition, especially in the performing arts. In other words, artists are free to do as they please, as long as they meet the funding criteria. The question is: what are the criteria and decision-making processes of today's cultural policies? Is there enough room for genuine artistic freedom in their overloaded political agendas?

Behind the post-bureaucratic rhetoric of artistic freedom and the independence of cultural operators freed from the structural censorship of the interventionist state, lie new forms of control, domination, and surveillance. The danger is not only to lack freedom, but above all to be unaware of it. Is it still possible to create outside the frameworks imposed by funding and promotion policies? Are artists aware of the invisible cages that restrict and direct their imaginations, and force them to adopt certain modes of expression, representation, and communication? Are they free when their actions are reduced to a simple reaction "against" or "in favour of" dominant policies, instead of being an integral and independent ACT OF CREATION? What kind of freedom is at stake when artists are reduced to labels that, depending on the season's fashion, one day highlight their nationality, the next their gender, in defiance of their artistic project as denounced by the four nominees for the *Preis der Nationalgalerie*?

## **Freedom: a matter of perception?**

In Louis Bunuel's anti-narrative film: *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974), guests arrive at a party and are invited to sit around a table on toilets rather than chairs. They chat pleasantly about excrement while relieving themselves in public. At one point, a guest asks to be excused and asks the maid, in an embarrassed voice, where the dining room is. He is led into a small room where he locks himself in, sits alone at a small table and eats. This scene is certainly one of the most emblematic in the history of cinema, as it masterfully reveals, through a subtle play of subversion and a simple detour of social codes and conventions, the serious limits of human apprehension of freedom. Both eating and defecating are biological functions of the body. But in modern culture, one is perceived as a social activity, the other as an exclusively solitary one. Undoubtedly, freedom is first and foremost a matter of perception. And it is precisely this perception that is at stake.

We are born into a culture. Our perceptions, references, likes and dislikes, tastes and views of the world are perpetually shaped and reshaped by a certain cultural context. Culture provides the guidelines by which a society can orient itself. In a way, it facilitates life in society by offering a common frame of reference. These frames are neither bad nor good. And, above all, they do not always suit everyone. But without culture, there is no common ground, no basic understanding between individuals in a given community. We therefore need to understand how culture works, in order to free ourselves from the constraints that hold us captive. Indeed, culture is a kind of invisible cage. We are trapped in unconscious layers of cultural structures of domination, control, and legitimization. Our actions are always motivated by some culturally-conditioned belief. And only an understanding of our captive condition can partially free us from the cultural corset. Moreover, even if we can break out of the culture/cage in which we have been socialized, we can only do so by entering another culture/cage. Absolute freedom does not exist. No one is truly free. We are always limited by the constructs we consciously or unconsciously adopt. Exactly as in Bunuel's 1974 masterpiece, the notion of freedom seems to be a ghostly entity, always elusive and unreachable. Furthermore, it seems that we can only define freedom by its opposite, i.e. by the lack of freedom. The situation of unfreedom is more perceptible than the situation of absolute freedom, which remains difficult, if not impossible, to define. What does it mean for artists to be free today? Where do they stand? Are they aware of

their cultural captivity? Can they create outside their cultural contexts? And how do they perceive artistic freedom?

In her essay entitled "*Freedom of everything: Freelancers and Mercenaries*", Hito Steyerl states that the "*contemporary state of freedom: is the freedom from everything*"<sup>2</sup>. She argues that the traditional liberal concept of "freedom to do" something has been replaced by the negative concept of "freedom from" something. In other words, what today matters is the freedom to relentlessly pursue one's own interests over the interests of others. Freedom is therefore reduced to the simple act of getting rid of what restricts this purely self-centred pursuit. Steyerl notes that this change in perception affects the conditions of the freelancer engaged in a "*free-floating loyalties*" subject to economic and political negotiation. She concludes that to be free, freelancers must "*give for what they take*". And this is exactly how current cultural policies are established worldwide.

It is not just right-wing demagogues who support a rational cultural policy based on utility, security, stability, and efficiency, but increasingly liberal-minded people too. There is less and less room for risk, improvisation, wandering, fragility, or the madness of art. Cultural policies are reduced to statistical games manipulating polls, surveys, and various forms of bureaucratic analysis, restraining all the art's unruly wildness to a set of data points, establishing control over the uncontrollable and quantifying the unquantifiable. In this tendency to assert a reasonable perception of art, artists are no longer free to work according to their own self-determination. They are obliged to link their work to specific projects or contents that are exclusively supported by current policies. Otherwise, they cannot obtain the necessary funding and recognition for their work. This imposed rule to generate a purposeful purposelessness is not only a violation of artistic freedom, but can be seen as an intimidating act. Tasked to prove the usefulness of their proposals, artists often adopt the same administrative vocabulary of statistics and quantification, and end up self-censoring or feeling censored for fear of not getting the funding they need to do their work. By confusing culture with art, an illiberal vision of art is gaining ground, even among artists. All too often, culture yearns for a kind of art which is reasonable, disciplined, useful, logical, responsible, and well-mannered. And cultural policies are constantly seeking to tease out an ideological stance from the very texture of the work of art. Yet art is by nature uncompromising. It has the capacity to confuse and disrupt orthodoxies

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<sup>2</sup> STEYERL, Hito, *The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin: E- Flux Journal, Ed: Sternberg Press, 2012, p. 122

that is why one can say that art goes against culture. But this implies an awareness of and distance from everything that can constrain the creative act and lock it into pre-established models. Freedom consists in perceiving the invisible cages established by the protagonists of the cultural scene, each according to their own interests and their own perception of artistic freedom. Freedom lies less in the act of doing what you want, and more in the discovery of the illusion behind that act. Freedom is knowing that you can never do what you want. Indeed, it is much easier to be free when you know you are not than when you think you are. Artistic freedom implies that artists can count on a set of conditions that can guarantee their choice without prior orientation. It is about understanding what art really is and what artists do. What are the possibilities of art, what are the limits of these possibilities, and how to stop expanding these possibilities to serve cultural, political, or economic interests? A new culture of dialogue needs to be developed between artists and cultural policy-makers.

### **A Freestanding Power of Art?**

There is undoubtedly a fundamental link between artistic expression and political or social expression. And all cultural policies seek to reconcile society's own community values with the values of art. Such reconciliation can easily turn into a kind of instrumentalization. When Deutsche Bahn, Germany's national rail operator, plans to use hostile "atonal music" to chase homeless and drug addicts off the city's S-Bahn trains<sup>3</sup>, art becomes a medium at the service of some governmental belief. Such is also the case when Mozart or Bach are played in public transport stations in London or New York to calm angry passengers and discourage teenagers from hanging around. It is not just a question of aesthetics, but rather of how art is used. What is the point of art? This seems to be the main question in cultural policy-making.

Since at least the 1970s, art has been increasingly claimed as a space of political representation for political minorities and marginalized voices. Instead of art as art, art has become a companion in arms. In today's polarized political context, art is often reduced to a kind of message-making, a side-taking, an issue-pushing, or a response to what is going on in a

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<sup>3</sup> MARSHALL, Alex, "Will Jarring Music Drive Drug Users From a German Train Station?", in: *The New Yorker Times* (22.08.2018), Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/22/arts/music/atonal-music-deutsche-bahn-drugs-trains.html> (Last accessed on 05.01.2024)

globalized world based. Most works of art seem to suffer from Syndrome P. They are intended either as propaganda or protest. Much like political positions, most current theatrical, literary and cinematographic productions tend to be simplistic, oppositional and dualistic.

Stimulated by certain cultural policies which, instead of seeking an alternative to hard power, merely perpetuate the same labelling strategies, incapable of conveying the full complexity of reality. For this reason, some people believe that culture is simply the downstream of politics. Most cultural policies merely reinforce the binary dynamic of oppressor-oppressed, victim-hero, migrant-national through which mainstream politics' advocates and opponents see the world. The concept of "integration" had become a dominant cultural discourse in response to nationalist policies, particularly in cosmopolitan, multicultural cities like Berlin. As a result, cultural policies and funding categories have doubled, or even tripled: first there is the funding category for "nationals", then a less important and very limited special funding for "artists with a migrant background", and finally a third funding category for "national artists" who engage with "exiled" or "migrant" artists. Art is not above division, but rather at its service. It has constantly been subordinated to political expediency. It is increasingly trapped in political narratives. It has no independent existence. As if it could not claim an irreducible freestanding value worth defending. Many artists no longer contest this dependence on politics. They have given the license of their imagination to current cultural policies that are in total contradiction with their autonomy. Indeed, etymologically autonomy means *Auto* (self) and *Nomos* (law), which implies self-legislation or self-government. Usually, artists accept no law above them. It is the very first law, and the only one. Which means, more or less, a law of lawlessness. Autonomy means that art has its own laws and its own logic, as Pierre Bourdieu tried to demonstrate in his book *The Rules of Art*<sup>4</sup>. In other words, art must be free of all political-economic imperatives and moral postulates. Art is not about appealing to some cultural policy or audience. Politics must stop at the gates of art. "*Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world*", wrote Shelley<sup>5</sup>. And this is exactly the challenge facing artists today: how to restore art's autonomous power?

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<sup>4</sup> BOURDIEU, Pierre, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996

<sup>5</sup> SHELLEY, Percy Bysshe, *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley Press, 2007, p 20

The fact is, artists have constantly to contend with an established system, positioning themselves in relation to power and marketing stakes that are not often favourable. However, they must be careful not to become solely businessmen. The real battle is to challenge capitalist mechanisms of resources distribution in order to liberate art from increasingly utilitarian and mechanistic arguments. It is true that art that engages with the challenges of the present moment cannot escape its political nature. However, a change of perspective on art and its role in society is necessary. The difficulty lies in producing art that can be timelessly inscribed in the present. Art is far beyond a simple question of "left" versus "right", or "good" versus "bad" messages. Art is not needed for the accuracy of its ideas, but for its ability to inspire subversive thought. Artists are the ones who often shake up public opinion. There is an inimitable force that belongs exclusively to art, and which triggers in the audience a different state of consciousness, the click of change, the click of the absolute. When, for example, writers create characters as alive as we are: Antigone, Nora, Hamlet, Woyzeck, Caspar, Scheherazade, Ali Baba, Djoh'a or Fanta Maa. These characters attract more compassion and attention than the beggar you see every morning in the subway. Flaubert on his bed of agony cries out in distress: "*That whore Bovary will live forever, and I am dying like a dog.*"<sup>6</sup>. Art survives the death of the artist. That is its mystery and its freestanding power. What makes a great painter's landscapes more pleasing to look at, more convincing than the landscape itself? No one can say.

We need art like we need oxygen, and that's not romanticism. Art inspires the necessary change. Not in the sense of "changing air", travel is in charge, tourism is thriving. Not in the sense of "changing our look" - fashion oversees that, and it is also thriving. But in the sense of changing our relationship to ourselves, to others, to reality, to the world. And this is precisely where the political power of art lies.

### **Fake Havens?**

Recent years have seen an incredible increase in international mobility and cultural exchange policies. International tours, festivals, artist residencies, workshops and symposia are

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<sup>6</sup> The veracity of this last statement is disputed. It was quoted several times by George Steiner in various interviews. And in the book: *Le palais des livres* by Roger Grenier (Gallimard, 2011).



the new territories for art beyond national borders. Many artists can only make a living from these invitations. Many also depend on these opportunities to create their work. Yet that the dynamics of the new art market perpetuate the precariousness and exploitation of artists. A closer look at the international stages featuring foreign artists reveals that in most cases, curators align their decisions with the political issues of the moment, without any long-term commitment to an artist's work or project. International artists who are not part of a dominant network receive only temporary, short-term interest. Instead of encouraging singularities, phenomena have been encouraged. We are witnessing the emergence of a new generation of artists trained in international residencies and workshops, unable to secure a regular position in Europe, returning to their home countries where they are overqualified and unable to integrate the system. These in-between artists are the victims of harmful, instrumentalizing and shortsighted cultural policies.

Many artists immigrate to find a better financial situation that allows them to work with greater freedom. Cities like Brussels, London and Berlin remain a dream for thousands of artists from emerging countries. However, once they arrive, most of them face a disappointing reality. First, because wherever artists go, they drive up prices. Without artists, the myth of Berlin would not exist. But it is precisely because of the massive presence of artists that rents, the cost of living and everything else goes up. Secondly, the idea that in cosmopolitan cities anything is possible is pure illusion. The idea of "universal" art often finds its limits in these so-called "multicultural" cities. This is where communitarianism comes into its own. Artists who had dreamed of creating more freely, are forced to subscribe to "labels" in order to find a production context. Their artistic freedom will be even more limited than they thought. Unfortunately, the situation is no better for refugee and exiled artists.

In recent years, we have witnessed a proliferation of cultural policies of rescue and compassion, not to say pity. Many international initiatives, cities and residencies have been opened to artists at risk or from countries at war, in civil conflict or in post-authoritarian transition. Cultural policies of temporary relocation are the new dynamics and economy of the art market. Across Europe, safe havens are welcoming visitors in search of new artistic opportunities. They all arrive with the great dream of being able to develop their professional careers. But they soon realize that their relocation is nothing more than a form of dispossession.

A dispossession of their artistic freedom. They find out that what they thought to be open, internationalized cities are in fact even smaller cages than the one they escaped from. If in the first cage, they were condemned to do no harm to the regime in power. In their new cages, they are condemned to fulfil the clichés and stereotypes of their home cultures as perceived by their hosts. Ephemeral paradises, fake heavens, and toxic hospitalities that instrumentalize artists and reduce them to mere labels or slogans are today's most dangerous threats to artistic freedom and artists' empowerment.

There is a pressing need to decolonize and put an end to labelling politics in the arts. It is therefore important to stage different representations of those who have been erected as "others", as well as new narratives to break with the West as the one and only valid aesthetic and epistemological model. The freedom of art requires us to de-Westernize the concept of the universal, in order to assert a different contribution of content and form to artistic practices. The Western cultural milieu is bogged down in colonial patterns and representations, which have led Western curators, for example, to favour mediocre artists who are far from representing the dynamics of their national cultures, but who may well fill the cliché of imported art lacking a certain professional excellence thought to be found only in the West. Arab and foreign artists in general must be freed from the role of victim or political informant under the protection of a "white saviour". International cultural policies need to be redesigned in such a way as to insert artistic and curatorial practices in a dynamic process opening up the possibilities of experimentation and creolization, as Edouard Glissant conceptualized it<sup>7</sup>. In the words of the English poet John Donne: no culture is an island unto itself<sup>8</sup>.

In short, the first condition for protecting and strengthening artistic freedom is to find an appropriate and sustainable funding model to guarantee artistic practice and artists' independence. This means breaking with the erroneous image of the artist on the bangs of society, condemned to precariousness and obliged to accept whatever is offered, as in Spitzweg's 1838 oil painting *The Poor Poet*. It is sad, so sad that the face of the artist has not changed too much since then, at least in many countries. Artists are still pretty poor, so poor

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<sup>7</sup> GLISSANT, Edouard, *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Paris : Gallimard, 1997

<sup>8</sup> In reference to John Donne's famous poem *No Man Is an Island* published in 1624

that they lock themselves away in the corner of a sparsely furnished attic, with an open umbrella to protect themselves from the water coming in through the leaky roof, wrapping themselves in sheets and burning their own writings to keep warm in the cold. Indeed, nothing has really changed. Artists are still the same painted characters: bohemian, anti-bourgeois, helpless, and perhaps less inspired than Spitzweg's *Poor Poet*!

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## Cover

The cover picture is a scene from the film *The Phantom of Liberty* by Luis Buñuel (1974)