

Beyond Cultural Diplomacy: Keynote Address by Mary Ann DeVlieg

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In 2007, I was part of a special presentation by four representatives of civil society arts and culture organisations to top officials in the DGs (General Directorates of the European Commission) responsible for the EU's enlargement (to include other countries), for its policy with neighbouring countries such as the Balkans and North Africa, and for the EU's External Affairs generally. This was part of a plan by the Director General of Arts and Culture to 'mainstream' the arts and culture, in hopes to direct more funding to them by convincing DG's with big budgets (such as Employment, Social Inclusion, Information Technology, Enterprise, Science and so on) that the arts could help them realise their own policy objectives.

The Director General of Arts and Culture was very nervous and prepared it for months: they had to get it right the first time, External Affairs was known to be very unfriendly to art and culture.

The day finally came and we arrived in the room. Heads of EU Enlargement and the ENP (European Neighbourhood Policy) came in. And finally, the big man - the Director General

of External Affairs arrived (looking very fine in his tailored shirt!) with a retinue of 5 young women.

Mr. DG sits down with a flourish and says to me, “My dear Madam, I’m sure you have a lot of good things to say, but I’m going to tell you right now, that I’m not in your cultured crowd. I know my business, but when you arty people talk, I don’t understand a word you say. Your language is incomprehensible to me and also to all of my men here.”

Well, while preparing my presentation, I’d done what all good students do: I’d decided to copy his own policy verbatim, illustrating it by describing arts initiatives—in the very same language, that contributed to his 8 stated policy objectives:

- Democracy, human rights. Civil society involvement in creating and maintaining a public space for free debate and discussion of values and rights
- Migration, people-to-people contact
- Economic exchanges and trade of products and services
- Regional cooperation.
- Good governance.
- Sustainable development.
- Mutual understanding, capacity building in the civil society and the development of intercultural competence.
- Visibility of the EU and ENP in Europe and in the ENP countries.

When I'd finished, the Director General looked at me with a big smile on his face and said, "You see, I didn't understand a word you've said!"

We are all trapped in our own fixed mindsets. The guy didn't understand, even when I read him out his own policy, because he had already convinced himself. Remember that Thomas Kuhn, the scientist-philosopher said that an old paradigm cannot simply be replaced by evidence, facts, or 'the truth'—the status quo will be defended because too many vested interests depend on it.

The former UK Labour politician, Denis Healey, famously once said about politics, "When you're in a hole, stop digging." I think these days we often dig our holes and then enthusiastically jump right in them. We fix our ideas, we write our policies and strategic plans, we assess them against pre-determined targets, and we assess them too quickly to see their more interesting long term effects. We are wedded (in the West at least) to a naive belief in cause and effect despite evidence (e.g. only 20% of all strategic plans are fully implemented). But we can't let go.

And our policies affect others (whether we are arts organisations, enterprises, grant-giving foundations, foreign affairs departments). They tend to 'format' the behaviour of those who need or wish to please us. As hard as we try to be reactive it's very hard in this context not to be prescriptive. And the good old institutional lag is at work: once we've noted something that works, we policize it (normally a rather long process) and by the time our policy is ready, the thing itself is old-hat. We promote whatever it is as the next best thing since sliced bread, encourage the spread of the good model, get far more than we bargained for and then have to stop supporting any of it!

Now, Diplomacy's historic role has been indeed to "format": to influence other countries to do what we want or to believe what we believe. Diplomacy (especially cultural diplomacy) also has the sad task to cover up the hypocritical (or paradoxical, or pragmatic) nature of the carrot and the stick—we bring aid to civil victims of the countries we bomb; we deny the results of free and fair elections when the people vote for the wrong candidate... or let's feel the pain of the former US Ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, who fought (and lost, at least for a while) a battle with the CIA to reduce the number of drone strikes because he felt that the growing anger of the population was worse for US policy than the killing of targets. But I will not get into identifying government policy errors here—I'm sure everyone here has their favourites! And it's so easy in hindsight.

Finally let's consider freedom of expression: I'm sure all of the countries represented here have signed the numerous international treaties and conventions guaranteeing this basic human right. But the situation is not so pretty when it comes to artistic freedom of expression these days. To the extent that the UN Special Rapporteur for Cultural Rights has presented her Special Report, "The Right to Freedom of Artistic Expression and Creativity" to the UN in Geneva this May and last week to the European Parliament. In Europe in recent years we've seen a frightening rise of nationalism and of nationalist parties in governments, for example in Hungary and Romania. They are very heavy handed when it comes to contemporary cultural expression, preferring folklore or traditional arts that promote nationalistic ideologies. And in France and the UK in the last two years we've seen censorship of theatre works: the BBC has recently censored a play they commissioned themselves from a Sikh playwright who they knew would be controversial. And in France, mobs of fundamentalist Christians effectively censored works by the Italian artist Romeo Castelluci and in Toulouse by Argentina's Rodrigo Garcia.

But let's get back to policy: why do we cling to these models? Can we invent anything better? Or at least experiment with something different? (Many of you are experimenting...

and I hope we'll discuss this here.) In the book, "Metaphors We Live By" we are told that "new metaphors have the power to create new reality." In other words, we become and believe what our turns of phrase—our everyday poetry—describes. How do we here support the emergence of new metaphors that may well end up undermining our own foundations but can also shape our future understandings of the world we live in?

I won't stand here and say that my sector, the arts sector, has it all taped. When I speak to my colleagues, I harangue them for our collective failures. But the arts, at their best are all about shifting our perspectives, undermining our certitudes, obliging us to see our normal 9-5 reality in a different light. Let's look at three examples of how arts and culture are turning over tables.

Midia Ninja is a media reporting collective of over 2000 collaborators in more than 100 cities in Brazil. Young, untrained journalists, they use smartphones, cameras and gas masks to feed social media with news from the thick of Brazil's social protests, to the extent that the mainstream media now rely on them. How did they learn many of the tricks they use? From their own beginnings as organisers of music festivals held simultaneously in 25 Brazilian cities: they learned how to use wifi networks and electricity cables supplied by friendly neighbours, and to fill shopping carts with cameras and generators while filming Carnival parades. For the moment, they are refusing crowdfunding or any other type of financing that would compromise them.

Will we design supportive policies that eventually suffocate them, or flexible, evolving, mutating support that can run alongside their exuberance?

COBRA is the acronym of the the British government's emergency committee (Cabinet Office Briefing Room A). It was set up in 1984 to respond to perceived national or regional

crises. It can suspend parliament and restrict public movement if it decides something is an “emergency.” It met in secret, chaired by the prime minister, until the late 1990s when Tony Blair decided to announce COBRA meetings to the public to show the decisiveness of his government, constructed images of good and evil, of the ‘good’ protecting ‘the people’. “COBRA: A Critical Response” is a project that gives artists and writers nine days from a publicly announced COBRA meetings to respond to it with an exhibition, book, film or other creative medium that promotes a platform for discussion. The artists reflect upon what they see as “politics that has increased its use of aesthetics to help manipulate and develop—often in a favourable light^its own agenda.” In other words, politics as performance, publicly announced “emergencies” as drama.

Who and how do we support this crucially important mirror-reflection of our own governments or societies’ behaviour, without—in doing so—ensuring they sell-out?

The Israeli Defence Forces have been heavily influenced by contemporary cultural theory. Military academies use 1968 texts from Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Guy Debord and contemporary writings on urbanism, psychology, cybernetics, post-colonial and post-Structuralist theory.

One Israeli General describes its influence as “the reorganization of the urban syntax by means of a series of micro-tactical actions.” In other words, the IDF has stopped using the streets and alleys of Palestinian camps and the Occupied Territories, and now moves horizontally through walls and vertically through holes blasted in ceilings and floors. Described by the military as “infestation,” this seeks to redefine inside as outside, and domestic interiors as thoroughfares; a conception of the city as not just the site but also the very medium of warfare—a flexible, almost liquid medium that is forever contingent and in flux.”

Might we say that the Director General of the EU's External Affairs may find it useful to start understanding cultural and art theory?

I'd like to finish with some words by one of my favourite thinkers, the Spanish Catalan sociologist, Manuel Castells, who has convened an interdisciplinary group, supported by the Gulbenkian Foundation, to analyse the emerging social impacts of the financial crisis of 2008. He calls this 'the Aftermath Project'. "In this crisis, some people are trying to go back and other people are trying to discover what the future could be. What doesn't work anymore is the present, for anyone."

To conclude, I'd like to remind myself as well as you of what I think is important:

- Be vigilant
- Really know what we are saying (practice what you preach)
- Listen and look, be humble
- Support, don't compete
- Don't monopolize, collaborate
- Look for (and invent) new assessment tools, assess over longer time periods
- Look for mutating results and let methods emerge

And my final story: my favourite civil servant was a man responsible for economic development in one of the English counties. It didn't matter what crazy idea you came to him with, he had a stock answer: "Well, I don't see why not!" Of course as the idea was researched, often we both found out "why not," but his initial premise was always positive: let's see. It's this openness and positive expectation that we all need to hold dear, especially now in "the aftermath."

