

SPEECH BERT HOLVAST

March 2009 Cyprus

Once upon a time elephants lived on the island of Cyprus

Excavations teach us that these animals were very small just before they became extinct.

Darwin explains that the doom of the Cypriote elephants was sealed when Cyprus was torn apart from the Asian continent.

As the remaining elephants had no contact whatsoever with their congeners elsewhere on the globe, the degeneration of the species took off. Today a deep cavity with a few bones is all that remains.

Artists and elephants appear to have one thing in common: free traffic to other habitats and cross-pollination with fellows is vital for lasting grow and development.

Without freedom of mobility, big artists will become small elephants too.

The artist as a nomad

Today we will talk about *The Status of the Artist*.

As a starting point for the discussion I want to mention that the status of the artist looks more and more like the status of a nomad.

Ever changing residencies, foreign degrees of education, sometimes co-living with partners with a different nationality: this is the day to day practice for more and more (young) artists in Europe.

Artist's collectives, music and theatre companies, production places: where on earth are these work unities still formed by people of the same nationality?

The nomadic character of artists is being enforced further by the fact that borders between art disciplines become more and more vague, just like those between art and entertainment, design, media, information and research. How does this modern, creative, nomadic character of the artist relate to a national debate about the Status of the Artist?

The question 'How to improve the Status of the Artist' has multiple interpretations.

First and foremost, we can ask ourselves whether or not it is possible *and* desirable to define the status of the artist. Furthermore, many understandings of art and artists exist, just like visions differ on the role of governments.

I now would like to mention a few things about these different visions - which we also encounter in The Netherlands. Then I will share some examples of the Dutch art practice with you.

Cheap love

The Netherlands are one of the richest EU members and have a highly developed cultural infrastructure. In my country, art and artists enjoy a high social status, measured by the ample attention given by the media, politics and the conversation at birthday parties. Every city longs to be a creative town where artists want to live and work.

And yet at the same time, recent research of the labour market shows that artists belong to the worst paid income groups in The Netherlands. Their average income is below the minimum wage as indicated by Dutch social security laws.

Everyone seems to love artists as long as they don't have to feed them, provide them with mortgages or pay a reasonable fee for delivered services.

I'm convinced that the situation in The Netherlands doesn't negatively differ from the situations in other EU countries.

Not a protected profession

The question why the paradox public value - private poverty exists everywhere doesn't have to be answered right now. But part of it is for sure that to people who really want to be artists relative poverty is no obstacle.

Apparently the immaterial reward is big enough. Moreover, everyone in my country is free to hang a sign on their door saying: "Here lives and works an artist".

Artist is not a protected profession - with in my country the exception of the architect and the interior decorator.

Damaged image artists

30 years ago in my country we had the BKR as unique lawful income regulation for especially visual artists. The impossibility to come to a credible definition of who was or wasn't an artist and who would be considered for the BKR-allowance is one of the reasons why this arrangement ended as a fiasco. The public extremities and the damaged image of artists to which the BKR led, still play us apart in the public opinion on the position of the artist.

Also nowadays it would be impossible to define who is and who isn't an artist. Because art and design, theatre and entertainment, new media, research, creative industry, poetry and advertising, etc. work together, continuously and unrestrained and in unpredictable, varying combinations.

Wanting to base A Status of the Artist on a sharp definition of who is or who isn't an artist, is impossible. Or this question will lead to inevitable dated borderlines between high art and low art, between established order and upcoming talent, between rebellious art and tamed art.

And: between artists from native ground with an own passport and artists from elsewhere.

To which degree would we want to give priority in the cultural policy to own artists in The Netherlands, Finland or Cyprus?

See artists as entrepreneurs

In The Netherlands we think that striving to record the status of artists in formal, judicial, legal terms is not the best way to amplifying the social position of the artist. We see artists above all as all-round creative entrepreneurs, private as well as public. They always look for audience and presentation possibilities, both at home and abroad.

Artists know that their product or contribution is of value - intrinsic value for the individual and social-economic value for society as a whole. These values aren't in contradiction with each other.

The artists' economy is by definition a mixed economy of private and public interests in which the government is one of the indispensable parties, but almost never the only party.

By using 7 recent examples I will clarify what we find important in this matter.

I will briefly comment on these seven examples - because of the time we have, but especially because I don't know which interests you the most. During the discussion I will find out what subject you would like to learn more about.

1) The WWIK

In The Netherlands is still one lawful regulation about income support from the government for artists. The WWIK, translated this is: the Law on Work and Income for Artists.

This law gives artists, when they apply for welfare, the choice to get a 25% reduction on the already low welfare.

In exchange for this reduction they are exempted from duty to seek work, that is obligatory for all other unemployed people and they can get support with founding their professional practise.

A few thousand artists use the WWIK. When artists apply for the WWIK, they are not judged by their artistic skills, but by their business skills.

The WWIK is really a sector-specific starters regulation for beginning entrepreneurs. The artist using the regulation obligates himself to show that his earnings from art are growing during the time he is participant. This income can also be acquired abroad.

2) Fictive employment

Musicians and other stage artists usually don't work on payroll, but for themselves. This can cause a lot of big complications and fuss in the matters of social- and healthcare insurances and income taxes.

In consultation with the Tax collectors office and the ministry of culture a fictive employment is developed. In exchange for a part of their wages, the boss of the stage where has been performed takes care of the remittance of insurance premiums. The artist also doesn't have to do the paperwork.

This fictive employment is used practically everywhere, except abroad. There is a chance the artist will be assessed for taxes twice, in the country he performed and in the country he pays his taxes.

3) Culture foundations in the spotlights

Writers and translators can apply for working grants issued by the Dutch Foundation of Language and Literature. Similar foundations exist to benefit designers, architects, visual artists, filmmakers, television producers, amateurs and performing artists.

Artists who want to work or conduct research abroad can also apply for funds. The foundations offer many opportunities as well as a large network of foreign artists' residencies.

Contrary to the WWIK admission, artistic quality is an important condition to obtain a grant. However, recently a new criterion was introduced. These days the quality of the entrepreneurship as well as the business plan of performing art groups are a decisive factor in the grant awarding process. For this reason, the (large) Foundation of Performing Arts often made it to the front page of our newspapers last winter. The money spent by the artists' foundations all comes from our central government. The biggest part of the Dutch art budget is allocated to these semi-public institutions.

4) Hairdressers and artists

The purchasing power of artists diminishes or increases depending on the amount of tax the government imposes on the sale of books, works of art, performances, CDs or films.

In The Netherlands most artistic expressions are taxed with 6 % VAT. The same applies to books and private lessons taught by visual artists, as well as to cinemas, including the commercial ones. CDs and CD-ROM's however, are taxed with 19%.

Recently we went to court when the tax collector tried to increase the VAT on jewels from 6 to 19%. Since these jewels were made in series, they were no longer considered works of art. Apart from seeing the price increase with 13%, the artist also received a tax assessment of well over ten thousands Euros. This put a huge constraint on his purchasing power.

Last week the EU agreed upon the preservation of high versus low VAT tariffs for labour-intensive economic branches. This may apply to hair dressers and cycle repairers but it's up to the local politicians in The Netherlands or Cyprus to decide whether the arts practice belongs to the aforementioned branch and can enjoy the benefits of the 6% tax rate. Should the 'VAT regimes' within Europe differ too much from each other, the uncertainty for selling artists will mount.

The four examples I have mentioned are all important for mainly Dutch artists: it enhances their mobility, especially considering the fact that holders of Dutch passports hardly ever face problems when crossing borders. But we have also successfully tried to expand mobility for visiting artists. We did this out of solidarity with other artists and because we understood that that only equality and reciprocity can lead to cultural cross-pollination. Therefore I will give two examples of successful interventions at policy level.

5) Imams and artists

Dutch politicians are working carefully to switch from a restrictive to a more welcoming immigration policy. For high knowledge, highly skilled foreign people who were usually employed in the ICT and business services, a one-stop shop was established for a quick and easy handling of visas and work obligations proposition. Initially this scheme only used an indication of the salary (Euro 45,000 pa) as a criterion to determine whether or not one was allowed to go to the special counter. Due to this reason, prostitutes and imams were able to pass by the one-stop shop but artists hardly ever made it that far.

Two years ago, the cultural sector has ensured that a special fast lane became available for its top segment. The salary indication is based on the arts collective income standards.

Many examples are known to me which show that this scheme has made it possible to dance and theatre companies to hire top cast from Cameroon or the U.S.

6) It is quality that matters, not the colour of one's passport

Every dance, theatre or music company sponsored by the government should see it as its task to become a part of the world top performers.

This can only be accomplished when the artistic director can choose suitable dancers or musicians on the basis of quality alone, rather than having to look at nationalities or passports. Labour market regulations should not force us to recruit from the local market alone.

A couple of Dutch art institutions has come to an agreement with the immigration and labour authorities. For international productions they no longer need to meet certain labour market requirements.

The Mother of all Creativity

So much for a sketch of 6 examples from Dutch practice that illustrate how we are working on increasing flexibility and mobility of nomadic artistic entrepreneurs.

I lack time to tell about our activities in the field of protection of intellectual and artistic property.

However, a 7th topic needs to be mentioned as it concerns the Mother of all Creativity: the freedom of artistic expression, closely related to the freedom of speech.

This artistic freedom is in many places - unfortunately in The Netherlands as well - firmly under pressure, for instance because it is judged against the freedom of hurting gods, religions and devout people.

In the various European countries this freedom is anchored fundamentally differently and restrictions herein will form the most serious threat to the international mobility of artists.

Finally, the elephants again

With my contribution I tried to clarify why I consider the subject of this excellent conference quite tricky and rather complex. Not only because of its practical implications but especially considering the contradictory and risky ideas and ideals that are hidden under the seat.

Allow me to finish raising the question what would have happened to the elephants in Cyprus should they not have become extinct. The Status of the Cypriote elephant would not differ from that of other elephants: well fed, well protected and loved by all. A status an artist could become jealous of.

Until it dawns on you what price you need to pay for this status of public darling: a total lack of mobility and forced to act according to the general expectations.

Maybe it's not so bad after all to choose for the freedom of a nomad and live the life of an unprotected artist, despite all the uncertainties and restrictions that come along with it.