



THE NECESSITY OF CULTURE  
by Chris Torch

**2**  
**AUDIENCE**

**If Culture has always been a questionable object for public investment, the situation has grown to a head in recent years. As governments at all levels look for ways of cutting expenses, the cultural sector is an easy victim; the cuts can pass almost unnoticed by the largest part of the population. Cut the arts - few votes are lost. Public financing for the arts and culture is seriously threatened throughout Europe.**

We seem to have come to the end of the long road. We started from a naturally subversive link between culture and society, in the amphitheatres of ancient Greece, where terrible acts were played out, debated, shared and reflected on, becoming narratives for our lives and the organization of our societies. We have arrived at a chain of expensive buildings, infra-structures that are over-dimensioned and under-financed, hidden corners for a limited and exclusive fraction of our society: the educated, demanding, privileged and economically independent.

This is not just a thought exercise or a provocation.

We must re-learn the necessity of culture. We have politicized, norm-criticized, iconized and instrumentalized the natural exchange of ideas, sounds, movements and dreams between people, that we call Culture. We have built ourselves into a dysfunctional corner.



Around the Corners, Prizren 2015



For the moment, we are losing the battle. The apparent uselessness of publicly financed culture creeps into the political discourse. What are we paying for? Is it social engineering? Entertainment by popular demand? Designed further education? Electro-shock therapy?

**The key to a progressive and effective re-construction of public cultural policy is that which is called “audience” - the imagined participant and presumed commissioner, the ticket buyer and taxpayer.**

## **RE-CREATING THE CIRCLE**

I once had a friend, his name was Mandiaye N'Diaye. Mandiaye called himself an Afro-European. Born in Senegal, in a small village near Dakar, he had emigrated to Ravenna, Italy at age 18 and met the director of the municipal theatre, Marco Martinelli. They became close friends, worked for years together until Mandiaye moved back to Senegal, where he prematurely died.





Mandiaye told me this story:

*“In my village when we gather for a cultural action, for storytelling, we gather in a circle. Everyone. Children, old people, dogs, the artists themselves. One steps into the center of the circle and she begins to dance, sing or tell a story. The people watching frame the performance. I see into the faces of my neighbors across the circle, watching together, sharing space. I see their reactions, I respond to them. The artist is not the point. The artist is important, in fact the key. But the point is the circle.”*

This natural relationship was transformed, sometime in the 1600s, probably around the same time the design of churches changed from human scale to grandiose symbols of power and submission. The circle was re-formed it into two half-circles: stage and audience. All light on me, darkness for you. You don't even know who's sitting with you or how many of you are there, because you're busy watching me, surrounded by your darkness.

Mandiaye told me: my task as a cultural worker in Europe today is to re-create the circle.

We don't need to change all the architecture, some cultural buildings are used in unconventional and interesting ways. But we need to re-design their function and above all the relationship that they impose upon the experience.

## LEADERSHIP

We face a major lack of committed and visionary leadership, politically at all levels and especially in Europe and globally. We repeatedly choose leaders who do not challenge us to develop but instead those who are committed to effective management of the status quo.



Around the Corners Prizren 2015



Around the Corners Prizren 2015

Look at the recent elections in the USA. Look at the rise of radical populism in Europe, parties without constructive programs, based in fear and hate: Brexit, xenophobia, ethnic cleansing, humiliation of women, mechanisms of control.

What cultural needs place demands on new forms of leadership?

- intercultural competence - in a mobile world we need to learn flexibility and tolerance.
- direct and regular contact with target audiences - cultivating empathy
- generating creativity and participation rather than measurable results
- developing convincing indicators for REAL results we expect from cultural investment.

A cultural leader must be judged based on the long term impact on the “target group” - the citizens. This is different than other more concrete public endeavors - the tax department, the telephone company or the post office.

Samuel Beckett: “To be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail... failure is his world and to shrink from it desertion ...”

The courage to fail is a pre-requisite for effective cultural leadership. A radically different work description compared to other sectors. Arts and Culture is the “research and development” department of our society. A place for creative failure, for hopeless projects, for untested experiment, for critical thinking.

Cultural leadership is a massive responsibility in a fragmented world, in a world where mobility and migration are primary factors.



Around the Corners Prizren, 2015





## EUROPE

During our recent study on how European cultural organizations work with audience development, a serious question appears: who needs to be developed? The audience? The producers? The artists? The buildings? The society?

The study was commissioned by the EU (DG Education & Culture), in an attempt to lift the issue of audience to the forefront of European cultural policy. We were given one year to take the pulse of publically financed cultural institutions and organisations, how they work, for whom they work, how they engage.

We analysed 31 unique examples of initiatives to engage directly with audiences. These, and many examples like them throughout Europe, define a new territory and an affirmation of Culture as commonwealth. Cultural operators and decision makers are

finding that it is the relationship that counts. Once they begin engaging with their audiences, the artistic eco-system changes radically.

The context changes entirely for cultural leaders. New and radically different demands are placed on how they organize the work, what the cultural offer reflects and - above all - how the efforts of the institution are communicated.

Even curators and artistic leaders are challenged. The content is channelled through different sensibilities. The target groups become visible, critical, interactive, sometimes disappointed.

All those working in the production and administration of a cultural organisation become necessarily engaged in building bridges between Art and Audience. Their roles become not only practical, in the background, but also creative and essential to the total experience, at the forefront of the encounter.



## ARTISTS

This is especially relevant for the artists themselves.

By engaging with their spectators/listeners/visitors, a natural empathy is cultivated, a creative curiosity awoken. An artist who enters into intimate dialogue with a potential audience becomes concerned about the quality of the reception and not only the transmission.

This means that artists need to engage with an audience not just during the experience but as part of the preparation. Inter-connection with a targeted co-creator is integrated into the rehearsals and the creation of the art.

To crystalize the connection between democracy and culture, we have to strengthen the link between citizen and visitor. Practicing culture is practicing democracy. When we stop seeing visitors as consumers, then we stop seeing citizens as consumers. We open to cooperation and co-creation, breaking the cycle of passivity.





# Intercult

Intercult is an independent production and resource unit focused on culture, ideas and the arts. Created in 1996, it is a publically-financed institution, based in Stockholm, managing both a designated Europe Direct office and Access Europa, a platform for cultural organizations in Sweden focusing on international collaboration.

Intercult focuses to a large degree on exchange and co-production with the European Neighborhood, reflected in the long term SEAS project 2003-2010 and CORNERS, a complex partnership of organisations at the "edges of Europe", 2011-2018 ([www.cornersofeurope.org](http://www.cornersofeurope.org)), both financed by the EU Creative Europe program.

We initiate and lead collaborative culture projects, networks and the development of intercultural and international project competence. We act interculturally, both as producers and experts. We initiate large scale co-productions, primarily at the European level. We connect local and international initiatives, we work across disciplines and in multiple partnerships. We bring together artists, operators and audiences, creating unexpected encounters..

From our home base on the south side of Stockholm, we interact as a project-based platform, engaging with others on cultural policy development.

## Chris Torch

Chris Torch, a former actor and director, is founder and Senior Associate at Intercult Torch is presently Program Director for Timisoara 2021 - European Capital of Culture and he has also been part of the artistic direction for Matera 2019 and Rijeka 2020.

Apart from large-scale project design, Torch contributes to intercultural policies. He currently serves on the Board of Culture Action Europe. During 2012-2013, he was designated expert to the EU Open Method of Coordination (OMC) group on Cultural Diversity, including 22 EU Member States.



**INTERCULT**

[www.intercult.se](http://www.intercult.se) 2016

