

International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies – IFACCA

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Panel One: What are the issues that have brought us to the crossroads?

Speakers: Jane Chu, Chairperson National Endowment for the Arts (USA)

Oussama Rifahi, Director Arab Fund for Culture (Lebanon)

Annick Schramme, President of ENCATC (Belgium)

Carlos Javier Villaseñor Anaya, Cultural policy expert (Mexico/Panama)

Moderated by Sarah Gardner, Executive Director IFACCA (Australia)

Oussama Rifahi:

Behind me, you will see a number of pictures from the work of grantees of AFAC from 2016, for this particular set, young documentary photographers from Morocco, Tunis, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia from our Arab Documentary Photography Program. I have added also some pictures from a book we have supported and launched last week under a new AFAC special program: *“EUROPA, An illustrated introduction to Europe for Migrants and Refugees”*.

We were asked to reflect today on the pressing issues that have brought us to the crossroads and have a profound impact on the cultural sector.

Let me start by sharing with you that, coming from my part of the world, the impression I have at the moment isn't one of arriving to a crossroad, but rather one of being forced down a long straight highway to hell. Because Crossroad would imply that we are faced with choices, ones that we do not have. We all have high ambitions for the positive impact of arts and culture on our world, and these ambitions are built into the vision and mission of our respective institutions. But as we compliment each other on our achievements over the last decade, I can only express a sense of helplessness, frustration and paralysis; the feeling that we, the artistic community in its regional specificity as well as global constituency, is yet again failing in its quest to make the world a better place.

For the arts and culture we are talking about today in this forum, cannot afford to be detached from the realities around us. In his “Frontiers of Art and Propaganda” George Orwell’s words resonate with strange familiarity. In the context of the clash between socialism and fascism in the 30’s, “Art had no option but to be political. What Art is *about* is so urgently important that the way it is created is almost insignificant”

But it seems today that Art has become subordinated to the relevance imposed on it by the cynicism of realpolitik. It is business as Usual. On my flight into Valetta from Frankfurt yesterday, sitting next to our keynote speaker Doris Pack, I read in the Spiegel that three minister-presidents from the Eastern part of Germany have rejected last week the call for further sanctions on Russia for fear of losing markets to sell German cheese. This early morning on the news, dialogue continues between the super powers alternating with the sad and familiar pictures of the relentless bombing of Aleppo. Meanwhile, the price of Syrian contemporary art from the diaspora is blossoming under the hammer of auctioneers in Dubai, London and New York.

So how did get so detached from the political breakdown that we are seeing globally? And what is the relevance of Arts and Culture today? The "Arab Spring" of 2011 represented a wonderful opportunity to prevent the problems that are now linked to the massive wave of refugees to Europe. Gilbert Achcar, Professor of Development Studies and International Relationships at SOAS in London was talking at a forum we organized last week in Berlin, titled Europe and the Mediterranean in Times and Migration: Opportunities and Challenges. He tells how this

opportunity was squandered by a Western reaction to the regional uprising that privileged shortsighted considerations over loyalty to the legacy of the European Enlightenment. With the return of dictatorships, which are heavily repressing artists and cultural activists, the West welcomed them again as agents of security and stability, preserving the flow of commerce and commercial exchange. Another opportunity was wasted when the West argued for non-intervention in Syria for the risk of making things worse. We all know what the results were! But there is one last golden opportunity that is much of relevance to our conference today, one that is at the very node of imagining where Arts and culture should be, how it can become relevant again, and that is related to the so-called “refugee crisis”. It is one last opportunity to finally change the West’s image in the Arab region by welcoming the refugees and helping to turn them into potential agents of progress and modernization in their home countries when and if they are allowed to return. To do so would represent at the same time a chance for their host countries to open up, modernize, counter the ageing of their population and the decline in their labor market, not to mention it will be a wonderful experiment of cultural enrichment.

We were all thrilled by Kanzlerin Merkel's initial attitude, with the euphoria of “Welcome Refugees” and we were full of hope. But pressure from the extreme right has slowly pushed politicians to yield to xenophobia: we are now building walls, signing agreements with southern Border States like Turkey, Libya and soon Mali to return refugees to their misery. And if we look across the Atlantic, where people are mostly preoccupied by a uniquely absurd run-up to the elections, the picture is far from prettier.

Edward Said told us that: “modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees.” We discover by reading the testimonials in the EUROPA book how we, our fathers and mothers, or their parents, have been arriving from somewhere else at one point in time or another, carrying with them layers after layers of cultural DNA.

So in conclusion, if I am asked about what is the most pressing issue for Arts and Culture today? I would plead without hesitation that it is how to make Arts and Culture relevant again in this context of migration and the rise of intolerance.

Let us face it: the arguments for why arts and culture matters are ageing and not in sync with the new generation of decision-makers, be it public entities or private players; increased private wealth and apparent increase in private philanthropy is out of sync with our traditional strategies as cultural players. So let us reflect together on how can we modernize our message, our *raison-d'être* in this time and age, how can we accommodate to this shift in global funding for the arts in a meaningful way. Through Arts and Culture we have to force a critical re-examination of individuals and societies’ disposition to empathy, solidarity, hospitality, generosity and tolerance. Through the universal language of culture, radicalization, intolerance and fear can be addressed in a profound and concerted effort to allow us to rally global citizens to responsible and constructive action.

Global migration and displacement due to conflict and poverty is by far one of the world’s most tough challenges today with more than 60 Million people currently on the move escaping conflicts or economic hardship. It would be a shame if we, the global community of Arts and Culture professionals not embrace it and allow this golden opportunity to be wasted. And what better place to talk about this than in Malta? At the crossroads of cultures and the center of the Mediterranean.