Report of the Arab-Balkan exchange platform – ArtGet Gallery, Belgrade, Serbia - 11/09/2013

After introductory words by Lola Joksimovic, Head of the Serbian Cultural Contact Point and Angie Cotte Secretary General of the Roberto Cimetta Fund (RCF), Ferdinand Richard, Chair of the RCF, opened the debate by briefly presenting the work of the Roberto Cimetta Fund. He underlined that the artistic mobility RCF supports aims to reinforce and sustain art's role in society.

Session 1 – Setting up transnational projects

The first session aimed to analyse the following question "In times of transition, what are the problems that artists and cultural managers face when they want to set up transnational projects and what are the possible solutions?" Ferdinand gave the floor to Milena Dragicevic Secic, UNESCO Chair for Cultural Policy and Management, Professor at the University of Arts in Belgrade, who presented some research that she had done on cultural policy in the Arab

world[1]. She emphasised that, from 2005, when the first generation of Arab cultural management trainers had been educated (through Cairo organization Al Mawred Al Thakafy), there has been progressively more and more art management training in Arab countries and this, coupled with policy research, can contribute to change.

She stressed the importance for art practitioners from Arab and Balkan regions to meet, enabling common understanding to emerge on both sides. The issues that artists deal with in both regions are overlapping such as the cultural policy request to contribute to national identity and identity building. We also share the common Heritage – Roman, Ottoman, and in both material and immaterial heritage this influence is evident (storytelling tradition, way of life, vocabulary, musical tunes, etc.) The Colonialisation and self-colonization, according to the theory of A. Kiossev (meaning accepting Western educational models and patterns) have created a distance between the elite of the intelligentia and everyday people in both regions that is highly problematic. Thus lifestyles are different from the two dominant cultural models. We also share orientalisation and self-orientalisation. So we show an image of ourselves that links us to western created stereotypes. We have languages that are both bonding and dividing in both regions (arabic and serbo-croat). Problems in mutual (non)-understanding are similar among Arabs from different regions as to Serbians, Bosnians and Croatians... (We understand each other but we fight over language differences). She gave the current example of a huge debate over the use or not of Cyrillic in public spaces in Croatian city (Vukovar). Dealing with the flows of refugees is also a similarity shared by both regions. There is also a permanent strive for freedom of expression and culture of dissent (protest). For example, it is only in Serbia that the book "The Twelve impossible", created of 12 censored Arabic stories, has been published! The book is a testimony about the strife of writers to express the need to live in different freedom countries. The translation into English exists but has not been published. We should publish it in Arabic language too so it can be available in the whole region – so that Arab population can read it, together with 12 stories of the book author and translator, Srpko Lestaric, how he found those stories, and what had happened to their authors.

Speaking about the aim of this meeting, Milena stressed the need of platforms such as this one to respond to the different needs of independent artistic organisations and to ensure transfer of knowledge that will be self-generated. She called for the artists in both regions to rely on their own resources, create their own projects and address donors for their ideas, not only to wait for EU calls which is accepting to respond to EU demands. Let's try to be proactive and use possibilities that exist in our regions and countries.

Finally she indicated that one book which might be helpful to understand these two regions is Dominique Moisi's book: The geopolitics of emotions, where the author wrote about the culture of hope, humiliation and fear in the world. The Arab world as well as Serbia went through all these "cultures" since World War II. Unfortunately now, the most dominant one is "the culture of humiliation". This culture brings different reactions, strategies – from self-destructive strategies of terrorism or self-isolation to the strategy of "complying with destiny". None of these are the right solutions. Thus, we, cultural operator have to fight the weight of inertia, trying to offer inspirational works, artefacts that will engage population also. She pleaded for innovation and experimentation, to orient ourselves to our own needs, and not necessarily to look on the EU market (where, it has to be admitted, there are a lot of opportunities).

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[1] « Opening horizons » by Milena Dragicevic Sesic, « Cultural policies in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia. An Introduction », Boekmanstudies. 2010.

Philippe Le Moine, Deputy Director and Cultural Attaché, French Institute in Serbia then took the floor and indicated that the French Institute was present in the countries of both regions. This cultural diplomacy network is a strength. It supports French art circulating in the regions and seeks to develop as a role model and a resource centre for art initiatives from all artists of the region. The French Institute serves the local networks, more so in some countries than in others. He gave the paradoxical example of African artists who have a difficult relationship with the French Institute as a post-colonial establishment but acknowledge at the same time the rich dialogue they can have about contemporary art with the people working there. He underlined that the presence of our Arab colleagues at this meeting has been made possible thanks to the support of the French Ministry of Culture. This is a good sign for the future. He underlined that a "regional" approach was developing as a needed trend in current institutional project-building. He would like to do more in this respect. The British Council is also thinking regionally. Synergies in both regions are possible. The Goethe and French Institutes are doing more and more. Currently his own projects are involving 13 countries including Turkey. The project "Teatroskop" concerns many countries that RCF also covers. Finally, he asked the artists and operators present to make the most of the opportunity they had today. They must be true to themselves, set their own agenda, identify their own freedom, think outside their usual box. Affinities happen.

Nicolaus Keller, Director of the Austrian Cultural Forum in Belgrade, then took the floor. He framed the context of his work in the region by indicating that the high-level negotiations in Oslo in 2006 had set agendas about dialogue with Arab countries that have to be consolidated. So the Austrian Government decided to pioneer more dialogue through further methods (a task force, cultural institutes). In 2011 dialogue with Arab countries became a foreign cultural policy priority, less so in the Balkan region, and his Government is eager to continue support in this area.

Ferdinand Richard underlined that if we are here it is because connections are not working enough. This may be due to the current context in which global cultural industries are seriously damaging and even annihilating the local cultural fabric and regional cultural ties. In 2005 the International Convention for the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions was adopted by UNESCO and consequently signed by 143 countries. This convention acts as an international treaty. It gives clear indications about how to make a fair trade between nations, how we create fair relations, how we preserve mutual understanding, and very importantly protect the diversity of our cultural expressions. As practitioners we must use this legal tool to address our governments, implement our autonomy and safeguard the diversity of our cultures.

The Declaration of Human Rights states that we are equal in dignity and in rights, which means that each one of us recognises the equality of our cultures. Today we are faced with a global market in which the monopolistic industries (be they old-style Anglo-American ones or new style such as Bollywood) are applying aggressive commercial policies that kill local, small-scale art economies and initiatives. There is no room for local producers. They have no job. They are in the street. They have no market.
Public funding should create the conditions of independence. He referred to responses given to a questionnaire that RCF sent out a week before the debate to the participants. The practitioners that responded reported about the danger of being instrumentalised by the very institutions that are supporting them. Maybe we should find a new word, a new narrative for this concept. Institutions have to justify and communicate about the support they provide. So in order to strike a fair deal we should write up contracts that frame this deal. In the contract, the artist would request his or her need for public funding

support coupled with total freedom of expression and the institution would state that it is providing the funding as long as the community can benefit from the artist's work. Emerging artists need public support until they develop a viable economic framework to work in.

We know that today this public funding is at stake but it is difficult to analyse the extent of the instrumentalisation. We know that we must advocate the importance of art and culture in society towards decision makers and that this advocacy is quite weak, particularly for international art practice. To survive internationally, artists and operators diversify funding schemes, as there is no global public funding for culture. Sometimes the funding comes from the non-cultural field but the reasons for providing it give little room for manoeuvre to artists. However, as practitioners it is important to accept that art is part of society and that this is not working in contradiction with the research for excellence in an art field.

The responses to the questionnaire also referred to the need for production funding. Production funding could be in the form of a loan rather than subsidies. The Roberto Cimetta Fund is looking into who could be the partners of a micro-loaning scheme with guarantors.

One of the Serbian festival managers present, took the floor and expressed the fact that we should revisit the concepts at work in the non-aligned countries movement. One of his colleagues, a curator of a museum of contemporary Art in Belgrade suggested that the term should be non-aligned modernities encompassing a wider territorial region than countries and develop a new narrative by making research on this.

A Programme Manager of one of the British Councils in the region spoke about the British Council's new research on Post revolution countries and the link between art and social change called Voices of the People. The research endorsed the need for the Arts to be more functional rather than only playing the Arts for Art's sakes (as the Hippie concept calls it, and where Arts should be free from being instrumental). Artists come from a specific social background therefore Artwork reflects social issues.

In her region they have seen Arts used as a tool to advocate for the Greater Good, a tool that can even claim impact on saving Lives and Souls. The Arts are currently playing a strong role in what is happening in the uprisings and revolutions. They have seen the birth of new political movements lead by artists and cultural leaders, which recalled for example 1949, when Albert Camus founded the Group for International Liaisons within the Revolutionary Union Movement.

She gave the examples of Syria and Egypt, where artists had to walk the road of politics. Everything is power, conceptualised power. But this wasn't about Elitism or Soft power. It's about the need to identify and support new forms of networks and communities, to lobby, to pressure for change. These are challenging times where artistic freedom of expression is threatened surfing between two type of oppressions ; dictatorship and Islamism. New forms of relationships (new relationship with the Balkans) can change ideas and bring new things to life. She gave the example of the trust destroyed with the west and countries like Britain because of military intervention and political positions. Nevertheless where politics failed, Cultural Relations succeeded to maintain trust, and the British Council continued to play a major positive role in People to People relationships.

The situation of artistic freedom of expression is drastic, but she keeps hoping and believes that finding ways of coming together and establishing new relations on the basis of human dignity are key to the post-conflict period, whenever that will be. We must defend and promote a creative relationship with other countries based on new ideas and peer-to-peer learning.

A director of an art school in Palestine returned to the question of instrumentalization and expressed her view that when she does art even in refugee camps it is art; she doesn't see the so-called "social impact". It is the donors who require the justification. Art should always be beneficial for the collective. When she receives funding she knows she has to make reports with words understood by the donor.

An Iranian film director living thanked Ferdinand for orientating RCF towards the challenges we face. He doesn't see instrumentalization in art but his role as an art citizen. The question is "What society do I want to live in?" Mobility could function as an alternative to societies I don't want to live in. Who pays for this mobility? Within which intelligentsia discourse are we producing art? There are two powers at work: the financial power and the structural power/intelligentsia of the society. My freedom lies in my own decision about my own limits, my own compromises and what I do with the funding I get.

Milena returned to the question about non-aligned countries. She gave the example of a performance of Indian art that took place at the BITEF Festival (a present from the Indian government). Although the performance was very different from the other performances of the festival, the leaders of BITEF did not see this as a weakness but more as a strength and now every year there is at least one performance from a different world theatrical root; for example Syrian puppets and so on. If people are creative, they will see opportunity in things that look like an imposition of the State (Grotowski, living theatre). Artists and operators from both regions have to inspire each other. There is a certain legacy of non-aligned movement and it only needs an impulse from us in order to create a platform against one vision of the world, globalisation. We must see this playing field as a table of negotiation. She gave the example of a research in Cambodia that bought to light that young people in Cambodia viewed cultural work as social work because the emphasis was on working with handicapped people. Young people who wanted to work with art in other ways, were therefore excluded from the arts and turned to other studies.

The manager of a Serbian cultural festival suggested that the way to keep your independence and your economy is through diversifying funding sources, one of which can be crowdfunding. One of his colleagues, president of a cultural association, gave an account of their structural experience as a response to globalisation.

A manager of a Lebanese theatre company suggested we examine more thoroughly the double etymology of culture/policy which both stem from the Greek words polis/politika. Artists in the Arab world are very much "multi-tasking artist" because they work with a vision that is aesthetical and political. Her theatre company is one of the first to initiate a group dynamic in the field of theatre production. This dynamic is very important for them not only to produce interesting work. Her company doesn't make theatre to do big business. They make theatre because they have something to say politically about their culture and their society. She insisted that this approach is what should and indeed does unite artists in the Arab world. If we want to make networks and platforms between operators and artists in the Arab world then we must work from this common base; art as a political voice in society. She went on to

clarify that the word politics for her means our responsibility in society as a citizen and has nothing to do with personality-building or TV shows. Also art is not politics, but funding art is. Art is deeply rooted in society but not only the local one, also the transversal one in which RCF operates for example. This transversal approach is the appropriate one to resist in a globalising world. Being funded by the State for most independent operators is not acceptable that's why they pay rent for example (as we have seen this morning in our visit of independent centres in Belgrade, who deliberately pay their rent because they do not want to be instrumentalised by the municipality that provides their space).

A collegue commented on the question of instrumentalisation by underlying the critical position of the artist in society. Nowadays there is a virtual society and a real physical one. The social networks relate differently to artists because the community that is developed is a fantasized one. The real community that the artist is linked to is the taxpayer community because it is with this money (production of society) that the artist can obtain public funding support. The institutions that "represent" the taxpayers have a discourse. How can we strike a fair deal with these institutions? There are many obstacles to overcome when addressing institutional funders.

A Serbian artistic director explained that her theatre addresses the critical issues of today (Afghanistan, Iran, Occupy Wall Street, etc). She doesn't get funding, she is initiating a utopian theatre hub. She is proud of this and can earn money on the side. Theatre must be bold and talk about reconciliation. For her, bureaucracy ruins ideas, so she would rather support mobility initiatives for example that provide "opportunities". Mobility seems a good policy to support because this is a response to globalised issues. The motivations that stem from the non-aligned movement are still valid because ideology-building is a major problem.

A Turkish curator spoke about her experience working in the visual arts in Turkey. The market for contemporary art is emerging and funding for this is from the private sector. Support from public sector means that your art has become "accepted" and that you are in the "safe zone". When the City Hall of Istanbul supports you they come and inspect your work. They may censor some work so you have to negotiate with them. If you do critical, political art you are not supported. Independent or medium-sized art galleries and exhibition spaces are dying. Only the big museums are safeguarded but the public doesn't visit them. An "established artist" has an agreement with the gallery but if you are an emerging artist the gallery will interfere with your choices. The Istanbul Biennial this year is on art in public spaces in the city. The main sponsors are two big companies. The Biennial is getting funding but is instrumentalised by these two big companies. The Gezy protest reflects a different aspect of art in society. During the protests a creative life emerged while the people were in the park. All the people there were becoming artists, creating and participating in workshops, etc. They were all anonymous of course but fighting for the same ideology. Crowdfunding in these conditions can be possible because the people believe in you and support you. You can create cooperatives in these conditions that are self-functionning, self-operational. Public funding always relates to a political agenda.

The project manager of an Egyptian arts foundation explained that the definition of art has changed in her country. Masses of people express themselves in the street. Grafitti is the art of the people. The voices of people in the street is the "music" of the city. In Egypt these are the real artists. Contemporary art is a very strong force. Artists want to be part of a society that expresses itself. Between politics, art and society there are no borders. All three are serving one goal: freedom. In these conditions, we return to primitive forms of art where the body is the main tool. Stories are performed to people and directly express

what is happening because it is a critical moment we are living in. The Festival she was working on was cancelled. Focus is on what is happening in the country and about freedom. But this unstable situation brings disappointment because it is not followed by the political decisions we hope for. How can artists protect themselves from this disappointment and depression? We are part of a big movement. Can people refuel the disappointment into new expectations? Are you in harmony, do you make a difference? It is a political game. We hit the harsh reality.

Thus, she stated that the Culture of humiliation that Milena was referring to should be seen in parallel with the culture of new creation and new forces. Revolutions in this part of the world will never stop, we are witnessing now a new revolution part II which is against extremism. The people of the region have learnt that they do have a voice. So even in the most extreme cases like Syria where the situation is beyond tragedy itself, we must continue, develop new ideas, advocate for change. A meeting such as ours can bring new opportunities, and open new windows for a fresh network with Serbia and more broadly the Balkan region.
As the markets of pirating and extremism that stems from fear are left by arms dealers to grow in the South without enough alarm of potential expansion, we today by creating this network can play a major role as a Global artistic community and the true leaders of Peaceful creative movements for change, to pressure and at the same time to calm down the agitation.

Nicolas Keller informed the participants about the new EUNIC MENA program, which is intended to be an incubator of projects focusing on building capacities in the creative and cultural policies sector.
The core business of this program is capacity building, which will be supported by the following schemes: a research scheme, a conference and debates scheme, a training scheme, a creative scheme, a web information platform focusing on creative industries and showcasing the data and knowledge generated by the whole program.

Ferdinand summed up the debate by thanking everyone for having talked about principles; how conflicts question these principles and how institutions demand that we structure our principles.

Session 2 - Networks

The following session looked at the conditions to establish bottom-up Arab/Balkan networks.

Ferdinand presented Culture Action Europe as a very interesting political platform for the arts in Europe and a good example of efficient and effective networking from the ground. But the networking process has contradictions. How do you establish a sustainable network and at the same time ensure turnover so that the network is continuously developing and in phase with the needs of the operators on the ground. How do you maintain professionalism of the network and not fall into the trap of corporatism (trade unions defending their own parameters)? A network of professionals is not therefore a valid answer; you must diversify the elements of a network. Also it's important to think about working inside the network and working outside of it? How much

time do you spend working on the network (inside) and how much time do you spend developing it (outside)? It's important that the balance be 15% inside, 85% outside. In other words a network is not a network for it's own sake. At the same time, if the network is too open, everyone can be involved and the network doesn't produce anything of interest. Another issue is how to make sure that networks do not enter into competition with their own members for funding sources. In order to avoid this, the rules of the game must be clear from the start.

A Serbian director stressed that the EU model is a welfare model based on taxpayers income. In the current crisis what kind of dependency models are we devising when the financial model is unsustainable? Decision makers are in "management mode" and merely decide how funding is allocated to art which you do after work! On the other hand, in other countries, systems don't function on taxpayers money. Local sustainable models of interaction need to be invented in an economically viable framework. Networks between the Arab and Balkan regions would respond to genuine needs.

It was highlighted that project leaders for the Anna Lindh Foundation for example are from the North, very little are from the South if none at all. Where are the South>South operations? Despite the expense of travel such cooperation requires networking in order to be set up and consolidated.

Milena provided an illustration of an association of independent organisations called Cooperativa. Such associations or networks of organisations exist on a regional level and national level. She suggested that regional funds such as AFAC (Arab Fund for Arts and Culture) and Balkan Funds exist to respond to such networking initiatives.

A Tunisian director suggested that we should base networking on our needs for cooperation. For example he can show music bands from the Balkans in the Arab world and he would be pleased to find out who could do the reverse.

Angie Cotte referred to a point that was bought up at the Madarat exchange platform they organised in Beirut in November 2012. During this meeting participants agreed that networks should be based on specific and defined reasons to work together and that they should trust and believe in the process which, if all works well, would lead to better working conditions for everyone including themselves. Building such trust is not so easy in an environment where funding is scare and competition is often the rule.

A manager from the Middle East area suggested that literature is one of the best way to know more about others so beyond networks what is also needed is translation of Arabic works.

A Moroccan colleague suggested that we learn methodologies and adapt them to the countries we live in. Networking should be adapted to the Arab way of life and not be a counterforce to align to any political agenda. Networks must propose an alternative narrative.

A discussion ensued about the independent decision to set up networks that should be decided by those who form the network and no one else. Such networks should not be set up to exist for the sake of existing and should cease if not effective. Language can also be a barrier to effective networking. Even

if networks are independent initiatives they require foundations/funding to survive so the independence is not so obvious. Networking in many respect is peer-to-peer learning that requires frequent meetings. Because of this, a process is set up that quite naturally leads to the definition of key players wherever they are from. It would be interesting to analyse a certain number of networks, see how they function, in which countries they operate and analyse what they do and what they don't do. A Serbian participant suggested that he could provide such a format.

Philippe made the point that a network was forming right before our very eyes and that all we needed to sustain it was tools like facebook. What would be interesting now would be to examine the specificity of such a network, our interests, our necessity and who are the wider collaborators. Networking would require travel tickets which are already difficult to fund so can RCF help with this or are there other funders that can provide this support.

It was mentioned that English was an authority language and led a cultural diplomacy model rather than a cultural relations model. How genuine are our collaborations? Language is a challenge. We must create genuine relationships and not cultural diplomacy languages. Ferdinand made the point that if this is the state of affairs then we must deal with it. We could for example establish a fair contract that defines the relationship that artists would like to have with diplomats. In the previous session we discussed certain values such as independence which would be defined in the contract and which both parties would have to sign and respect. Even if the agenda setters are more concerned with security and defense they are nonetheless interested in intercultural processes.

An attendee from the Balkan region suggested that making headway in his country and region takes time because trust needs to be created. The reality of the huge diaspora from all these countries questions the EU's integration policy while at the same time reducing possibilities for mobility and circulation. Networking doesn't fit with the current EU policy that limits mobility.

Networks would require setting up NGOs whereas the experience of most operators or artists here is that the majority of changes are initiated by non-formal, non-official rules. So what do networks offer to grassroots initiatives as agents of change? Do we want networks? Is facebook enough?

An Arab operator suggested to go back to Angie's comment that the benefits of a network can be defined according to the improvement in the working conditions of artists. Gatekeepers support some and not others whereas networks give you visibility that gatekeepers cannot ignore. Networks give you support and allow you to preserve your freedom of speech. She has already experienced censorship and networks gave her support.

The president of a Serbian cultural association asked what Arab artists needed to cooperate with them?

An Arab collegue expressed that Arab artists are interested to open up a dialogue and are curious about Balkan culture because they want to build up collaboration that doesn't adopt the EU format that they are reluctant to continue.

An attendee from Serbia expressed his concern at the way the audiovisual industry mainstreams creative works by over-exposing certain cultures and undermining others. It is difficult to find information about Arab films and to do this you have to look at the independent scene.

A discussion about the entertainment industry followed and underlined the extent of the global, monopolistic and hyper-capitalisation strategy adopted, fuelled by a winner mentality. Smart answers have to be organised to resist to that.

Ferdinand Richard thanked all the experts for their excellent and active participation. He also thanked the hosts for their efficient organisation of the meeting. The discussion was ended and the participants were invited to meet each other individually for speed-dating sessions to present projects and see if they could work together.