

# On the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions

Speech for Interarts, 13/12/2005

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Final version 04/01/2006

## **An IETM Publication**

**IETM** the international network for contemporary performing arts, is a membership organisation which exists to stimulate the quality, development and contexts of contemporary performing arts in a global environment, by initiating and facilitating professional networking and communication, the dynamic exchange of information, know-how transfer and presentations of examples of good practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Thank you to Interarts and the Government of Catalunya for inviting me here to take part in this round-table.

This speech is in four parts. The first part tells about the organisations I am involved with, not for egocentric reasons, but to give you some useful information, and also to let you know the perspective from which I will approach my analysis of the Convention.

And, as those who know me, know that I always criticise that which I love best, the second part is a criticism of the text. First I will criticise, then I will praise, and I will end with some next steps which we may want to take.

A word about myself and the network I am representing. IETM (international network for the contemporary performing arts) is 25 years old; it was probably the first “European cultural network” to come into life. This was in 1981 in a small village in Polverigi, Italy at the occasion of a small but very vibrant international theatre festival. From that early belief in the importance of cross-border collaboration and exchange in the contemporary performing arts, the enthusiasm of the five founding members grew into the IETM as we know it today: over 400 professional organisations such as festivals, arts centres, theatres, theatre and dance companies, programmers, producers, other networks, documentation centres and even public authorities in cities, regions and states. The art forms represented by-pass traditional forms of theatre and dance and extend to collaborations with installation art, film and video, experimentations with new media and interdisciplinary forms.

We used to say that IETM was the network for those organisations who are “independent in statute or in spirit”. Although one can define ‘independence’ in many different ways according to local circumstances, and although IETM now includes government agencies, that spirit of independence and the respect for independent thinking and acting, is still very strong in IETM.

I am also a founder and Board member of the Roberto Cimetta Fund/Fonds Roberto Cimetta (Roberto was the Director of the Polverigi Theatre Festival and a founder of IETM). The FRC is an independent association (a mobility fund) which gives around 200 travel bursaries each year for professional travel of artists and cultural operators travelling in and around the Mediterranean for professional reasons such as tours, looking for work, making a short course or stage, researching possibilities of exchange. ([info@cimettafund.org](mailto:info@cimettafund.org)) We are delighted to announce that we seem to have inspired the birth of a new mobility fund based on FRC’s model, but for Africa, called Art Moves Africa, funded by the Ford Foundation and currently housed by the Young Arab Theatre Fund, which shares offices with IETM in Brussels.

Finally, I am a founder and Board member of [www.on-the-move.org](http://www.on-the-move.org) a web portal, training and advocacy project for professional mobility in the arts. The web portal currently gives 1600 links to sources of funding and information for cross border mobility and collaboration in the arts in “Europe and her neighbours”, and has a monthly newsletter with 30 – 50 new sources of info or funding each month. Current partners in this project are Visiting Arts UK, the Goethe Institute, Relais-Culture-Europe (Culture Contact Point for France) and the Finnish Theatre Information Centre, and we HOPE to finally have a Spanish partner soon, something we have been working on for almost 2 years...

## 2. Story

I'd like to start with a story of a very educational experience I had a few years ago which was reinforced during my travels in the last years. If not for this I am sure I would have approached the Convention differently. It was an ASEF (Asia-Europe Foundation) seminar in Viet Nam held prior to an ASEM (the Asian and European governmental group) conference and it looked into some of the legal issues around this Convention.

Over the 2 or three days of the seminar a very predictable opposition installed itself between a Minister of Culture of one of the Asian countries, and me. It must have looked like a puppet show. Each time I stood up and commented on the importance of the contemporary in art, he would stand and talk about heritage, folklore and the traditional. When I talked about mobility of people and ideas, he described the corruption coming from the West. He said 'old masters' and I said 'young artists'. I said 'interculturality' and he said 'extinction of traditional culture'. I said 'immigrants' cultures' and he said 'indigenous peoples'. He said 'institutes' and I said 'independents'. He said 'threatened' and I said 'flourish'. I said 'create and innovate' and he said 'protect'. I said 'copyleft' and he said 'it's important to work with the majors to fight theft of intellectual property'. We both said 'diversity' but for me in my liberal democratic paradise, and for him in his totalitarian regime, we meant very different things even if using the same word.

This Convention reads much like the script of that weekend seminar, and if I have used almost all the key words in the Convention, it is no accident. It is easy to see that the Convention, obviously, has been written to appease all and every government in hopes that all would sign it...and almost all of them did!

## 3. Perceptions

But how do people in the culture sector itself see it? My observations lead me to believe that most cultural operators in Europe know very little about it, if anything at all.

Much of the media and popular reaction to this Convention is based on uninformed perception or opinion rather than informed analysis.

The perception is that it is a treaty against a bad guy. (The bad guy being the American film and TV industry). The perception that all 'cultural diversity' is necessarily a good thing. The perception that we are under threat and this Convention will protect us. The perception that all minorities need to be supported.

Let's unpick these.

- In her book, "World on Fire"<sup>1</sup>, economist Amy Chua describes what she calls 'economically dominant minorities' in countries in all corners of the globe. As a Chinese woman married to a Jewish man, she states things with a frankness most of us would not dare. The minorities are Nigerian, or Lebanese, or Indian, or Russian etc. but they have both profited and suffered under what Chua calls the two most dangerous exports of the West: democracy and capitalism. Democracy, because its export form is a raw, crude form which never existed in the West, solely giving voting power to the masses, and capitalism which again is exported in such a raw and crude form that has never existed in the West, without its counterpart - a system for redistribution of wealth. This situation leads, Chua posits, to democratically elected nationalists who incite hatred and

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<sup>1</sup> World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability. Doubleday, December, 2002

blood-baths against the economically dominant minorities – themselves guilty of over-profiting from the resources of their adopted countries.

Which of these cultures would the Convention protect? Which is the minority in need?

- In my own country, Belgium, the far right-wing nationalist party, formerly known as the Vlaams Blok, has a culture, wishes to publish and distribute books and magazines, and has recently criticised the Belgian government for funding “elite culture”. Is this the minority culture that this Convention would promote? What about fundamentalist religious groups, of any sort? They have cultures, schools, literature, television stations....

#### **4. Values**

The Convention is based on a series of precepts, beliefs and values which have been enshrined, in particular, in UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted in 2002. But although many countries signed it, how many of them actually follow its articles and assure their citizens of its rights and freedoms?

For example the Objectives and Guiding Principles reaffirms the sovereign rights of States to do what THEY deem appropriate on THEIR territory. My experiences in several countries lead me to believe that what we would define as ‘diversity’, some States would definitely NOT deem appropriate.

Likewise Article 17 (Interculturality) says that parties shall cooperate in providing assistance to each other, in particular to developing countries. I'm sure that some African tragedies could be explained away by saying that a neighbouring country was helping its indigenous peoples to express their culture, which was in danger... And closer to home, what else but this was Mr. Milosevic saying when he ethnically cleansed to protect his own people from their ‘other’ cohabiting citizens.

#### **5. Closer to home: the contemporary performing arts**

In terms of my own network and interests of its members, which are: support to the independent sector, contemporary creation, cross-border co-productions and exchanges... well, the word ‘contemporary’ is not mentioned once in the document, and the word ‘mobility’ only once and then with the qualifying phrase “to the extent that it is possible”. The word ‘independent’ is not in the Convention, but ‘institution’ certainly is.

Ok, Ok, I'm painting a darker picture than necessary, and indeed there are phrases which seem to mean the things I find lacking, even if the precise words are not there. Phrases which call for ‘renewal and exchange’, for ‘NGO's’ and ‘civil society’...but could we see in this Convention a real threat to independent, contemporary performing arts organisations? Will it mean the establishment of quotas, such as on French radio for ‘chanson’, so that festival directors must programme x% of local companies, or choreographers must work with a majority of local dancers, or theatre companies must only play works by local playwrights? Are artists going to be obliged to make work only about their regional or national identities? Is this really identity politics dressed up nicely?

## 6. A convention for our time

NO, I think if we see the Convention as a statement of aspirations and values IN A PARTICULAR MOMENT OF TIME we can be more positive.

I say, "in a particular moment of time" because our own Western governments are not all exemplary models. They also include some 'bad guys':

- the UK's insistence on sponsorship which leads to pressures to make 'popular' work;
- the Dutch insistence on audience numbers and commercial theatre;
- the French, whose politicians on all sides seem to have lost any interest, and certainly any interesting ideas about art and culture;
- the Belgians who are wrapped up in their own Dutch-French split and (except for the far right) sometimes forget there are enormous and growing numbers of 'others' in their cities.
- And Italy, where media concentration is not only allowed by the government but caused by the government! (and where, coincidentally, there is a grave lack of quality programming despite the hundreds of channels)
  
- and in almost all of our liberal democracies, we see an increase in the instrumentalisation of art and culture as economic goods.

Hence the paradox of this Convention 'protecting' culture from the market and being signed by these same governments!

## 7. Positively!

Well, now that I have trashed it, what is GOOD about this convention? In fact, too much to quote it all. These are the values and beliefs that underpin most of the best work that we see in our sector.

In the Preamble, the Convention states that cultural diversity is strengthened by the free flow of ideas, nurtured by constant exchanges and interaction between cultures.

The second objective, speaks of creating the conditions for cultures to flourish and freely interact in a mutually beneficial manner.

And the 3<sup>rd</sup> objective aims to encourage dialogue among cultures with a view to ensuring wider and balanced cultural exchanges in the world in favour of intercultural respect and a culture of peace.

Objective f) reaffirms the important link between culture and development

Articles 8 and Article 71 b in Chapter IV maintain the principle of openness to other cultures of the world.

Article 12 promotes international cooperation, whether bilateral, regional or international.

Article 14 discusses sustainable development and actions to be taken in developing countries notably in the areas of production and distribution, capacity building, transfer of not only technology but also know-how. It is in this article that the word 'mobility' finally appears, although qualified: '...facilitating the mobility, to the extent possible, of artists from the developing world'. (But why add that that limiting clause?)

What is crucial here is who will be the 'parties' forming the committees monitoring and supervising the Convention and how will they be selected. For as always, this Convention will depend on its INTERPRETATION. Whether it becomes an effective tool for achieving its aims or a piece of dead rhetoric, will depend on the quality, energy, insight and strength of these 'parties' not to mention real partnerships with the cultural sector itself. Those, in other words, who do the work: artists and cultural operators.

## 8. Next Steps

The next steps are really up to us in the cultural sector:

- We should all analyse and discuss this Convention, in all cultural networks, associations, meetings etc. in order to be able to debate and really understand it.
- We should ask all of our governments who will be on the committees and how they will be selected.
- We must be in touch with them, ask how and when they will react to it, and enact it.
- As well as how they will research their own national situations and inform themselves of what is needed.
- We need progress reports, not to UNESCO but to us.
- But above all, we need to USE it, ourselves, use it and live by it.

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