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Informative impuls by Robbert van Heuven, de Theaterschool, 18 February

Talking about subsidy for the arts – or rather, the support of the community for artists reflecting on that community – we could start 17 thousand years ago at the caves at Lascaux. In those caves there were artists working on art, instead of hunting and gathering. Others had to hunt and gather for them, so they had time to draw. Their work was in that way supported by the community, or in other words: subsidized.

Or we could start in the 5th century BC, in Athens, where the city-state of Athens paid for the Festival of Dionysos where tragedies were performed. Not only to give the Athenians a good time out, but more importantly to use the fiction of theatre to reflect on the possibilities of that newly found principle called democracy.

Today we will talk about artsfunding in the here and now, but don't let anybody tell you that the community paying for artists is a new thing, invented by left-wing do-gooders to sponsor lazy subsidy addicts. In human history, the arts have always been subsidized in one way or another, because communities always have needed artists to reflect on those communities.

The foundation for the current cultural policy in the Netherlands is based on that same principle. It was laid during the second world war and during the reconstruction in the years after the war. The Nazi's thought that the arts could play a fundamental role in educating the Dutch citizens into good national-socialists. Artists were not so much asked to reflect on society, but rather to confirm it. To do so, the arts were more heavily supported than before the war, and the social position of artists was improved. The non-critical, non-Jewish, National-Socialist artist, that was, of course, but still: the foundations of publicly funded art as we know it today were laid during those years.

After the war the new socialist minister for Education, Arts en Science thought – like many of his colleagues in Europe – that educating critical citizens could prevent the rise of extremist



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politics from ever happening again and that the arts could play a fundamental role in that education.

Note that both the National-Socialists as well as the socialists after them, had a specific idea of the role the artists as well as the arts could play in a society.

As time went on, the basic construction of the state supporting the arts didn't much change. Thanks to the roaring sixties, the state extended the support for the art to more experimental arts forms, rather than bourgeois art alone. A lot of attention was given on the so called 'spreiding', the idea that theatre and dance must travel around, so they are accessible to every citizen, no matter where they live.

Between the sixties and the nineties of the 20th century literally hundreds of theatres were build and every self respecting village in the Netherlands has one. In the nineties and in first decennium of the 21th century more thought was given how to create more interest for the arts in broader layers of society, than the well-educated, white middle and upperclass.

But there was one more significant and dangerous thing that also changed: as the decennia past, both artists and politicians slowly forgot why we had invented the state support for the arts anyway. The memory of the war and the importance of the role the arts can play to educate and to resist extremist tendencies had faded and had given way to 21th century consumerism in which entertainment is a commodity and shallowness is a virtue.

All though until 2010 most politicians agreed arts and art education were important, but nobody exactly remembered why that was. With this, the ideas and the arguments that supported the state funded arts eroded. The results of this fading and eroding were of course best visible in the vision of the arts as held by state-secretary for the Arts Halbe Zijlstra, who was a member of the cabinet Rutte I that took its seat in 2010.

Zijlstra publicly wondered why artists were so addicted to subsidy and why they couldn't earn their own money. The general public – which had never given any thought about arts funding



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what so ever, let alone had any notion of the history of Dutch arts funding – echoed with him and the artists – who's memory of the arguments of the value of funding the arts had also melted away – had no answer to it.

The real answer to Zijlstra's question – that the government spent dozens of years being the dealer of those so called addicts and with good arguments, so there wasn't any reason to find other sources of income – was never posed.

Neither was posed that there was nothing wrong with the funding system, if you kept in mind why it was designed: to make high quality art accessible for everyone in the Netherlands. It had done exactly that for years. And very successfully, for that matter.

The result of the lack of arguments on both sides is the crippled art policy that Zijlstra left behind. This policy rests heavily on the big institutions: Toneelgroep Amsterdam, De Nederlandse Opera, Het Concertgebouworkest. These institutions are simply too big to be questioned. In other words: politicians don't need to have fundamental arguments about the role of the arts in a society to agree on the fact that you don't destroy De Nederlandse Opera. Especially, if you like your political career.

More problematic are those institutions that are small, are experimental and don't attract big audiences. To argue why the Veemtheater should exist, you need, of course, a more complex argument about the role of experimental movement theatre and the need for young talent to experiment without a big audience.

It are those 'harder to explain'-institutions that have had the biggest problems to cope with the budget-cuts. The 'productiehuizen' for young talent have been trimmed down, and there is less room for smaller and diverse kinds of theatre and dance. Partly because the 'Fonds Podiumkunsten', which funds the smaller dance- and theatregroups lost a third of its budget, but also because blackboxtheatres have to close or can't program as much as they did because of budgetcuts in the cities and towns that are responsible for them. The smaller



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groups that do remain make less productions and have shorter tours. Interns are used to make up for the loss of budget and pay for the actors that do get paid is low.

How sad it may sound, that is the reality in which you have to find your way when you leave this school. And although I am convinced that you are all very talented, there is no room for all of you at De Nederlandse Opera, Toneelgroep Amsterdam or het Nederlands Dans Theater. To find your way in a trimmed down artsworld will be in short very challenging.

Part of the challenge for you – the new generation of Dutch artists – is to help restore the arguments that have gotten lost in the past decennia about the value of the arts for society as a whole. And in a world that is drifting amidst plenty of crises, in which a lot of creativity is needed to solve those crises, those arguments are not hard to come by. But it is important to have those arguments ready before your leave this school.

During the discussion about the budgetcuts the newsprogram Nieuwsuur interviewed a student from the Conservatorium. 'Why do the arts have to be supported', the interviewer asked. 'Because otherwise I don't have a job', she replied. That is in a lot of ways the wrong answer.

Arts subsidies are not invented to give artists jobs. They are there because of that what artists do is profitable to society. But because that idea has been eroding, you, or rather we, have to find a way to revive this idea. It is important that you take your time during your years here in this building to think really hard why you are an artist and how you see your role in society.

The better you get in formulating your role as an artist, the bigger the chance that people will listen to you and get interested in the work you do. People are interested in artists. Because, as I said, society needs you and your creativity. But first you need to convince them.

The hopeful thing is that in the changing landscape of the arts, there are more and more opportunities to convince people that what you do is relevant to them. And maybe the best



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place to do so is not with the big institutions. Your talent will probably not be needed in the places the artists before you were needed. Because of the budget cuts chances for most of you will probably not lie with the big companies. The ministry and the Fonds Podiumkunsten don't have big budgets to support starting artists.

More chances can be found in other places, in the crawlspace between the old structures. In building creative and lasting relationships between the arts and other parts of society for a example, like Wunderbaum of Adelheid Roosen are trying. In making the audience part not only of the final artwork, but showing them the process of making it. In convincing others that being creative, thinking out of the box is not only fun, it is fundamental in finding solutions for getting ahead as a society.

All though the challenges are tough, there are a lot of chances for creative people out there, and the more of you take those chances, the more – hopefully – others are reminded of how important the work is that you do. But for that to happen, you have to know who you are and what your role in society will be. Before you can convince other people that you are important, you yourself have to know why that is. And I wish you all the best finding an answer to that difficult question.