

This text was written collectively by an assembly of concerned art practitioners based in Brussels

A short insight into Flanders today

In Flanders, we are recently confronted with severe budget cuts in the social and cultural field. These measures are the outcome of increasingly Flemish nationalistic tendencies in the political field over the last years. After the last elections in May 2019, a government was formed based mainly on right-wing to extreme right-wing Flemish nationalist ideals. As a result, a strong Flemish identity course is shaping the political discourse, demonizing what is traditionally called 'the left' and cutting support in fields that are traditionally associated with 'leftist thinking', such as the social and cultural field.

In Flanders, there still exists such a thing as the 'cordon sanitaire', a policy of non-cooperation with the extreme right-wing populist Vlaams Belang ('Flemish Interest'). The agreement not to engage in formation conversations with them and keep them out of the parliament dates from the party's election victory in 1991, which caused outrage and shock in society. However, since then, the discourse of right-wing parties has started to resemble more and more that of Vlaams Belang. This is especially the case with the biggest party in Flanders, the separatist, conservative N-VA ('New Flemish Alliance'). Despite speculation that the cordon sanitaire on Vlaams Belang might be lifted, the party - which again gained a lot of votes during the last elections - is currently still situated in the opposition. This causes a paradoxical situation, as the biggest party in the parliament, N-VA, and the biggest party in the opposition, Vlaams Belang, share many nationalist and identitarian values.

In the recent Flemish coalition agreement, the Flemish identity discourse is dominant and used as a base to shape values, rights and qualities. This discourse demonizes any plurality of identity, belief system and origin and imposes drastic cuts on integration policies. Furthermore, the ideal Flemish citizens are entrepreneurs, not in need of social care, 'excelling' in their talents which are situated mainly in the domains of science and economy.

Regarding arts and culture, the emphasis on entrepreneurship leads directly to demonization of subsidized art as being too dependent on government money. Within the discourse of multiple right-wing politicians, art is increasingly considered to be a leftist 'hobby', 'spitting in the face of Flemish citizens'.

For the arts field, the high point - or rather low point - in the implementation of these measures, was the announcement last November that project subsidies for autonomous artists would be reduced with 60% already in 2020. Art organisations would suffer cuts of 3% or 6%, which meant they would have to adjust their budgets for a new financial situation starting only one and a half month later.

Artistic project subsidies in Flanders function as the main source of income for many artists, not only young artists at the start of their oeuvre but also established artists who do not profit from structural funding. An austere cut in this domain of the arts quickly became

symbolic for a government cutting down the ability for artists to develop, to grow and to organise themselves locally as well as internationally.

This week saw the announcement of the decisions in the latest round of applications for artistic project subsidies. The government claims to have 'found some extra money', adding 600,000 euros to the budget, handing out a total of 4 million euros to artistic projects. However, it suspended the deadline for the next round of applications, stating that there will be no second round this year unless more 'extra money' is found. At the same time, the government announced this week that they recently spent 2,1 million on buying a painting of Tom Wesselman from a private collection. The painting will become part of the permanent collection of SMAK, the museum for contemporary art in Ghent. The government decides to invest in 'top pieces', putting forward the idea of excellency, investing mainly in established art instead of investing in future artistic trajectories. As the spokesman of prime minister and minister of culture Jan Jambon stated, the acquisition of the painting of Wesselman was an 'opportunity to be seized with both hands'.

Over the past few months, protests have arisen strongly both in Flanders and in Brussels. We've organised marches, sit-ins, artists and art workers are attending committee debates and plenary sessions in the Flemish parliament, countless articles have been published. However, every couple of weeks we are faced with more bad news and disappointments. At the end of December, for instance, on the very day of the application deadline, it was announced that project funding for participatory youth, culture and sports projects would be canceled outright, leaving many socially engaged organisations out in the cold.

The motto of the ongoing protest is 'art = solidarity'. But we often ask ourselves the question: to what extent are we truly acting in solidarity? Through conversations with many people in and around the arts field, we realize that the field itself has often failed to show inclusion and solidarity. Many people are not allowed to participate on a structural basis. How can we learn from past mistakes and build a new future together? How can we not simply restore the old but tackle the future with a more socially radical imagination?

However much we still have to learn, one thing is clear: our current government is deliberately destroying the social-cultural sphere in Flanders, in order to nip potential social change in the bud and to create a protective and solipsistic Flemish nation. Cultural conservatism, nativism, neo-liberalism, entrepreneurship, gentrification and consumerism are given free rein to replace social values.

Clearly, the violence of othering and precarisation that many art practitioners now fear, have long been a daily reality for many groups and organisations that embrace hybridity. Take, for instance, Brussels cultural hub LeSpace, which is currently in the process of being forced out of its venue in the city centre. Founded and led by activist writer/philosopher/fashion designer/curator Rachida Aziz, for 5 years LeSpace has been operating as a unique, independent arts centre; a progressive platform for community work and social change; an anti-gentrification project in an area that is gentrifying rapidly and drastically. With little to no funding, relying heavily on volunteers, LeSpace has managed to organise a panoply of events, drawing large crowds. However, due to a change in ownership of the building, LeSpace now finds itself evicted by a landlord with a history as a MP for the populist right.

Forcefully operating in the margins, LeSpace has never really been a beneficiary of the arts infrastructure that is now being dismantled, but it has had an undeniable impact on the Brussels cultural field. We are currently supporting LeSpace in organising a 2-day occupation of its soon-to-be former venue, during which questions around gentrification will be addressed.

We are convinced that the austerity measures that we are facing are only the first symptoms of the ethno-liberal ideology the current Flemish government is implementing. We are bracing ourselves and preparing for many years to come, years in which we will have to fundamentally practice activism and radical solidarity in order to oppose the exclusionary narratives that are sweeping Flanders, Belgium, Europe and the world.

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