

# POINT OF VIEW #1

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«HOW CAN YOU NOT GO MAD WHEN YOU WORK IN AN INDEPENDENT ARTS CENTRE? ».



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**This was the question asked last autumn at the sixty-ninth meeting of Trans Europe Halles, in Krakow. Indeed, one may ask this question, because the exercise of our activity in this context is difficult, complex and, especially, structurally fragile! And anyway, what is an independent arts centre?**

Last January, I was invited by the Pekarna centre, in Maribor, Slovenia, to take part in a conference entitled “New Times / New Models”, which, precisely, asked three questions: *What does it mean to be independent? Why be independent? How can you remain independent?* I have been asking myself the first question for a long time. The categorical answer to it is: when many arts institutions are put in place by the will of local and regional authorities, the organisations that are independent are those created of their own free will by people, collectives, artistic or cultural

associations from civil society. The questions of “why” and “how” are linked, because the way we do things cannot be dissociated from what we want to do. In our activities, being independent does not mean doing what we want when we want, but doing work in the general public interest according to our own definitions and our own means and resources. And this is not in contradiction with our freedom of action.

But are we really independent? Yes, therefore, in the sense that we are free to make our own choices and to say what we want, free to develop our projects as we see fit, free to assert values and opinions including when they are contrary to those expressed by the powers-that-be, by the established moral code or by so-called “common sense”. The art that we produce and promote is art that is critical, subversive, iconoclastic, and sometimes politically incorrect, and always independent. That is it. That is what we affirm.

However, looking a little further, we are subjected to many constraints, requirements and pressures, and, if censorship is now only applied in a concealed or indirect way, in our countries, self-censorship can be strong. Do we really say what we want? Or what we think? Is our voice not more guided by the necessary alliances and strategies that we must put in place than by the affirmation of our values? And, if we place ourselves on the level of the economy, our independence becomes very relative. Here, it depends mainly on the goodwill of the public powers, the requirements that they impose on us, and the policies that they develop. In other countries, there are other mechanisms in action, but which all limit us and restrict us. So what of our affirmed independence, and what arms have we for defending it?

On one hand, we have our capacity for invention. This was the subject of the Maribor conference: we must invent models that correspond to our

values before being obliged to conform to the models that people would want to impose on us. Obviously, this also applies to the economic question: what is our capacity for inventing alternative ways of economic operation? On the other hand, we have our capacity to pressurize, to mobilise others, to mobilise ourselves, and to defend and promote our projects not only in a technical, circumstantial and conventional manner, but especially politically.

For, while we define ourselves as “independent”, we are above all “interdependent”. Every organisation and every project is in an environment which it cannot ignore, and with which it must reach a compromise and construct. On the vertical plane, Philippe Henry defines our activity as a professional sector or industry, just as there is a timber industry or an energy industry. That is, there is a logistic chain in which every link is indispensable, and for which everyone has his/her place. But culture is also practised, and very greatly, on the horizontal plane, and other agents act and interact beyond the sector itself. From the role of the politician, who must not be only considered as a fund provider, but above all a partner, to that of social, educational and community organisation players, and to the people themselves, ordinary individuals or citizens, everyone is concerned, and everyone has an influence. The difficulty is in succeeding in agreeing and therefore in speaking the same language, which is difficult, as we realize every day. But it is necessary – very necessary indeed!

Therefore our future depends especially on us, collectively, jointly and supportively, beyond our own corporate entity. It depends on the words we will pronounce and the actions we will engage. Either we will be submerged and crushed between economic powers on one side and political power on the other, or we will always manage to keep a step ahead, and we will prove that ideas, invention, movement, and therefore the future, are on our side. The path is narrow between the mountain on one side and the ravine on the other. Some of us will fall or have already fallen, and projects will go downhill or have already gone downhill. But, if we do not want the

years and decades of work and commitment to be reduced to nothing, then we must – and this is absolutely necessary – firstly understand the world in which we are now living, and, without renouncing our hopes for change, adapt our projects to it, all together.

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