

To Prime Minister Jambon.

It is with a sad heart that we receive the news about your funding cuts for the arts in Flanders. For many years and with open arms we have programmed and attended artistic projects created by many generations of Flemish artists. These artists distinguish themselves through their urge for innovation, international perspective, multidisciplinary approach, political sensitivity and exceptional quality. Whether it was Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Otobong Nkanga, Dries Van Noten, Mokhallad Rasem, Miet Warlop who adorned international stages and museums: all of them validated the incredible reputation that Flanders holds within the international contemporary arts.

Many other Ministers for Culture in Europe are jealous of the dynamic cultural tissue that exists in Flanders. As part of the international cultural sector we often visit Flanders to understand how we can learn from you. If we may make a suggestion: we advise you to do the same. Allow yourself to be astonished by the exceptional domain that has come to be under your governance. Take the arts and the cultural sector seriously by enlisting expertise within your cabinet and consult the professional arts sector on a regular basis. Allow yourself to be amazed at how much Flemish artists and organisations can do with so little. But also keep an eye out for the many burn-outs previous cuts have caused, and how limited and unsustainable this mentality of more-more-more with less-less-less actually is.

We are concerned about two evolutions in your plans. It is a miracle that so many artists still find their way to our international podiums, even if they do this in an increasing smaller rate than before. After a decennium of budget- and funding cuts there are significantly less Flemish artists to be found in prestigious European and international festivals, theatres or museums. The proposed funding cuts could deliver them the final blow and render Flanders completely useless within the international field.

All things considered, your obsession with big institutions, heritage and prestigious projects is incomprehensible. It is not only the Flemish institutions who are beacons of excellence, it is the intricate weave of organisations, companies and artists in the cultural landscape of Flanders that makes it flourish on an international level. That you wish to completely drain exactly those artists of today and tomorrow who rely exclusively on project-based funding, is almost repulsive. How can you focus so heavily on the fictional heritage of yesterday, while you completely ignore the actual heritage of today?

The Flemish do not possess any more artistic traits in their DNA than the Danish, Italian or Catalan people do. Since the emancipation of the field in the '80s however, Flanders has been blessed with an exceptional artistic landscape. As one of the first jurisdictions that was transferred to your community, the artistic and cultural sector emitted a radiant light of immense quality which put Flanders on the international map at once. This exceptional dynamic was born out of a lack of big cultural institutions, a not too heavy artistic history and the creation of opportunities and allocation of means from the bottom up. That this specific dynamic will have to endure a serious punch to the face because of your policy is an all too easy prediction.

You like to point your gaze abroad, over the horizons. Be aware that this gaze is returned. Where the arts is concerned, Flanders is a guide and reference for The Netherlands. Where the arts is concerned, the Flemish model is being talked about vigorously in Scandinavia. Where the arts is concerned, it drips in Paris while it pours rain in Brussels. And we would like to keep on looking and keep on being confronted by all those artistic creations that are kneaded out of the Flemish clay.

But the artistic quality should remain a guarantee for this to happen, and we fear that your current and future policy will generate anything but the right circumstances.

Prove that what one does oneself, one does better. Invest in the artists that put Flanders on the map internationally. The world is large and gets a bit larger every day. If you want to distinguish yourself internationally, you will need to put money where your mouth is and reach a deep understanding where the true richness of Flanders is located. It would be a pity if the Flemish emancipation and cultural wave become but a small detail in the history books, put to a halt by the Prime Minister of Flanders Jan Jambon.

November 12, 2019

Initial signatories: Agnès Troly, Olivier Py and Paul Rondin, Festival d'Avignon; Annemie Vanackere, HAU Hebbel am Ufer; Annemieke Keurentjes, Holland Festival; Catherine Wood, Tate Modern, Christophe Slagmuylder, Wiener Festwochen; Dries Douibi en Daniel Blanga Gubbay, Kunstenfestivaldesarts; Martin Faucher, Festival TransAmériques; Matthias Lilienthal, Münchner Kammerspiele; Matthias Von Hartz, Zürcher Theaterspektakel; Rene Pollesch, Volksbühne Berlin; Stefanie Carp, Ruhrtriennale; Yoshiji Yokoyama, Tokyo/Festival, Milo Rau, NTGent.