We take care of the cultural ecosystem

Where is Culture, What For?

The colourful snapshot of instrumentalisation

Where is culture today on an imaginary value map? Does it have its own unique place? Or does the policy discourse in European countries view the value of culture rather through the lens of external areas? Has the tendency to instrumentalise culture only increased in recent years?

Instrumentalisation refers to imposing concerns from other policy sectors onto cultural policy[3] and understanding the value of culture through other domains, such as economics, social cohesion, well-being, or international relations. Specifically, instrumentalisation shifts the focus to these external values, moving away from viewing culture as a self-sufficient entity with its own unique worth. This unique or 'intrinsic' value of culture remains challenging to articulate in advocacy and policy terms. At the same time, the very dichotomy between instrumental and intrinsic value is increasingly being questioned as a component of 'sterile debate' or 'a product of neoliberalism'[4].

There are many different ways in which culture's importance is framed in the national documents outlining cultural policy strategies, agendas, plans, and visions of the EU member states. Our analysis focused only on the discourse and rhetoric used in these documents, rather than the actual measures for implementing these strategies and agendas. Nonetheless,

[3] Steven Hadley & Clive Gray (2017) Hyperinstrumentalism and cultural policy: means to an end or an end to meaning?, Cultural Trends, 26:2, 95-106, p. 96, DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2017.1323836

[4] Ibid, p. 95; Polivtseva, E 'Culture as an Industry Won't Solve Sector's Problems', 4 July 2024, Culture Policy Room, last seen 5 September 2024, https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/if-culture-is-not-an-industry-what-is-it-then

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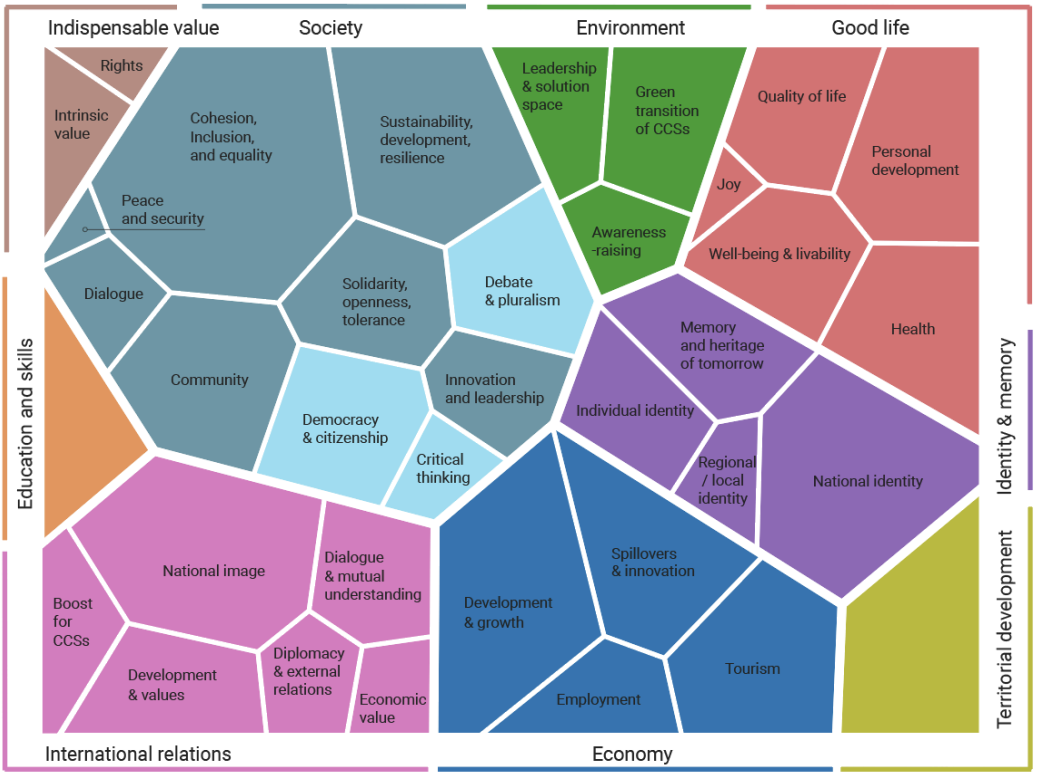
synthesising the dominant trends in articulating culture's value can be useful for understanding the nature of today's cultural policy-making.



Graphic 1. Values attributed to culture by national governments

Through our content analysis, we traced and mapped all instances where culture, or a specific cultural sector, was mentioned as important[5]. This

[5] We mapped and counted the various fields where governments emphasise the importance of culture, art, specific cultural sectors or disciplines, and participation in cultural activities. For instance, statements like 'culture is a foundation of social cohesion', 'attendance at museums enhances individual wellbeing and health', or 'culture is the glue of national identity' were recorded. We counted each country that mentioned these values across all reviewed documents, but we did not count repeated mentions of the same value area within a single country's documents. We then clustered these articulations of culture's value into the groups presented in Graphic 1.

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includes being recognised as a resource, contributor, or driver for various fields of public life. The snapshot (Graphic 1) reveals the diverse values attributed to culture by national governments. These values span across society, economics, international relations, wellbeing and quality of life (grouped under 'good life'), environment, identity, and more. Let's take a closer look at this snapshot.

The society piece is by far the largest one among the various ways for national governments to explain culture's value. It includes the various social missions culture is believed to perform, all closely interdependent. Under social cohesion, which is the largest element in the snapshot, we grouped all types of notions referring to the contribution of culture to the process of creating cohesive (in some documents understood as 'homogeneous', in others as 'inclusive' or 'equal') societies, in which minorities, typically local ethnic groups or migrants, are included in the public life of the country - through learning and adopting local culture, or gaining equal opportunities through cultural participation. Furthermore, a smaller yet significant number of governments sees culture as an important driver of social progress - for instance, in terms of developing the intellectual capital of societies, or making them more resilient in the face of global and local challenges. Building communities, which is obviously linked to the cohesion piece, but more typically referred to as creating the actual sense of belonging to a group and shaping some sort of a shared identity, is an important role attributed to culture too. Finally, rather significant value areas are related to strengthening democracy, creating space for pluralism, enhancing freedom of expression and critical thinking.

International relations and the economy are the other two important pieces of the cultural value snapshot. When it comes to using culture as a tool for international relations, national governments still predominantly see its role as a promoter of their countries abroad, referred to the national image, prestige, brand, creative potential, global significance, visibility,

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leadership, presence worldwide, and more. Other ways of seeing culture's role in international relations include promoting democracy, human rights, and sustainable development in the world; building mutual understanding with other countries and peoples; or seeing culture as a classic diplomacy tool. Finally, some documents refer to the economic reasons of embedding culture in international relations alluding to the trade of cultural goods, or justifying the internationalisation of cultural and creative sectors as a way to boost their development, mainly through enlarging markets, and acquiring new knowledge and skills.

The economic value aspect is quite straightforward: while most references to economics focus on how the cultural and creative sectors directly contribute to GDP, trade and economic growth, there is also a recognition that these sectors generate spillover effects across various economic sectors. They are believed to contribute to business innovation primarily by enhancing creative skills, facilitating experimentation, and testing new solutions. Additionally, tourism represents a crucial economic dimension often closely linked to culture in many cultural policy documents.

The 'good life' area of the snapshot is quite visible too. Some of its elements are linked to the social dimension, in particular the one on personal development and enrichment; some, related to the quality of life, partly overlap with the economic value in the way they are framed (some documents mention social and economic quality of life and wellbeing). The parts on health and physical and mental wellbeing are also considerable pieces of the puzzle.

Finally, the identity piece is a curious field of the diverse references to culture's importance in nourishing, building, protecting, or sustaining various types of identities. The most commonly mentioned is national identity, followed by individual identity, which can also be understood through the lens of personal development or as one of the ways of defining the intrinsic value of culture. Special importance is attached to culture as a

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vehicle of memories and identities over time, fostering the self-awareness of peoples and nations throughout history. Furthermore, the idea about culture connecting the past and the future is a significant component of the national discourse on the value of culture.

One may get dizzy diving into this long list of at times abstract and at times barely distinguishable types of framing culture's importance in different fields of our life. But where is the narrative which celebrates culture in its own right, does it exist, how does it sound?

Reviewing the national cultural policy and strategies documents, we have remained keenly attentive to any mention of culture as an essential aspect of people's lives, a fundamental right, a public good, and other similar expressions emphasising culture's importance in its own rights. These references, highlighted in the 'Indispensable value' section of the graphic, are remarkably few in number and generally lack detail compared to the more outward-focused explanations of culture's importance, such as those related to economics, social inclusion, international relations, or health.

Often intrinsic value is mentioned as part of a detailed list of other various roles attributed to culture. For instance, Malta's Cultural Policy 2021 reaffirms the intrinsic value of cultural and creative sectors, but in the same phrase refers to 'the role culture has in tackling global issues such as democracy and collective action, climate change, and other matters related to social and environmental sustainability'[6]. The document explains this by 'a shift in cultural policy from a focus on cultural and creative development to a wider understanding of the links between the cultural sector and the rest of society'[7]. The Strategic Vision Statement for the Arts of the Flemish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Culture, Digitalisation, and Facility Management (2019-2024), explains that in evaluating projects 'the intrinsic

[6] Ministry for the National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government, Malta 2021, National Cultural Policy 2021, p. 13

[7] Ibid

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quality of artistic work is the starting point', further stating that 'focal points in project evaluation is the potential to reach an international level or to be comparable to international references'[8]. The Principles of the Cultural Policy 2021-2024 of the Netherlands state that 'culture holds significant intrinsic and connecting value'[9], not unfolding what the two types of values mean and how they are different.

In some papers, the 'intrinsic value' is brought up together with the state support for culture. For example, Romania's 'Sectoral Strategy in the Field of Culture 2023-2030' states: 'In the European space, cultural goods and services benefit from the protection of the state and their intrinsic spiritual values, bearing the emblem of rituals, models, or cultural practices that are significant for a people or certain geographic communities'[10].

Do the authors of all these documents share the same understanding of the notion of 'intrinsic'? We can only speculate why 'intrinsic' is rarely elaborated in such documents: perhaps it is assumed to be easily understood by the reader, or maybe there is no solid definition of it compared to the usually elaborate and precise nature of the rest of the document in which it is featured. In any case, as mentioned earlier, references to intrinsic value are notably scarce compared to the numerous, more persuasive and clear ways of articulating culture's contribution to other domains of public life.

The shifting rhetoric on culture's value

Understanding culture primarily as a tool, product, or resource for achieving external goals is not only a distinct but also an increasingly prevalent trend in cultural policy-making in Europe. There is a growing

[8] Flemish Government 2020, Strategic Vision Statement for the Arts, p. 7
[9] Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Netherlands 2021, Principles of the Cultural Policy 2021-2024, p. 16
[10] The National Institute for Cultural Research and Training (INCFC), The Sectoral Strategy in the Field of Culture 2023-2030, p. 13

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demand for cultural organisations to demonstrate their social impact through contributions to health and social inclusion, and the expectation that cultural investment will foster the development of creative cities and urban regeneration has become a global phenomenon[11]. The argument that culture contributes to the economy has gained strength in Western policy discourse since the 1980s and remains prominent today[12]. Furthermore, the trend of utilising culture in populist discourse has been recognised and discussed[13].

As a consequence or as a symptom, there is a growing tendency among grant-giving bodies in different parts of Europe to prioritise certain perspectives in artistic content, often driven by the focus on specific topics and policy areas[14]. Multiple voices, including those of experts interviewed for this study, attest that over the past decade, policies and funding programmes they apply for have become significantly more precise, detailed, and meticulous in defining how and why a cultural project can be useful. 'There are too many boxes to tick these days', we heard repeatedly from cultural sector representatives throughout our research and beyond.

Have cultural policies in Europe become more instrumental than before?

We did not compare the current national policy frameworks of the EU member states with those from 5-10 years ago, but we did track how the EU rhetoric on culture has changed. For this, we have analysed the evolution of the EU's cultural policy discourse in recent years. This includes examining the EU's Agendas for Culture (2007 and 2018), the five Work

[11] Steven Hadley & Clive Gray (2017) Hyperinstrumentalism and cultural policy: means to an end or an end to meaning?, Cultural Trends, 26:2, 95-106, pp. 96-97 DOI:10.1080/09548963.2017.1323836; Tobelem, J-M

[12] O'Connor, J 2024, Culture is not an Industry, pp. 32-45

[13] Jakonen, O., Renko, V., & Harding, T. (2024). Challenging the Nordic model? The cultural policies of populist parties in Finland and Sweden. International Journal of Cultural Policy, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2024.2313520

[14] Whyatt, S 2022 Free to Create: Artistic Freedom in Europe, p. 39

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Plans for Culture adopted since 2008, including the current one from 2023 to 2026, and the legal framework of the Creative Europe programme, comparing the 2013 regulation to the one adopted in 2021.

Before diving into the analysis of these papers, it's important to acknowledge the EU's limited competency in the field of culture. This historical limitation explains the Union's tendency to frame its actions on culture as contributions to other policy areas rather than treating culture as an independent domain. For instance, the two key documents of the EU's cultural policy framework - the European Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World (2007) and its successor, the New European Agenda for Culture (2018) - set clearly instrumentalising objectives, each focused on promoting culture in specific fields, such as social cohesion and wellbeing, intercultural dialogue, economics, and international relations[15].

However, it may be insightful to trace the evolution of the EU's discourse on culture over time: whether it has become more instrumental or less so. The key conclusion drawn from this analysis is that over the past decade, the EU's rhetoric on the value of culture has become more versatile and explicit, encompassing an expanded range of roles that culture is associated with.

To begin with, an interesting insight emerges from examining the guiding principles of the EU Work Plans for Culture. Originally, these principles[16] primarily focused on how the cultural field should be governed at the EU

[15] Commission of the European Communities 2007, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World, pp. 7-11; European Commission 2018, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A New European Agenda for Culture, pp. 2-8.

[16] The EU's Work Plans for Culture for the periods 2008-2010 and 2011-2014 did not include a specific section called 'guiding principles'.

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level and how the plan should be implemented. For instance, the guiding principles of the Work Plan 2015-2018 emphasised the role of culture in achieving the Europe 2020 Strategy, but placed greater emphasis on and implementation- and governance-related aspects. These included strengthening links of the Work Plan with the Council and its rotating Presidencies, as well as with Creative Europe; pursuing evidence-based policy; enhancing cross-sectoral collaboration; and mainstreaming culture into other policy areas[17]. The principles adopted for the 2019-2022 period are somewhat more explicit about the value of culture, specifically citing its contribution to sustainable social and economic development. However, they still primarily focus on governance and management aspects, such as adopting a holistic and horizontal approach to cultural mainstreaming; promoting regular dialogue among Member States, European institutions, and civil society; improving governance by clarifying responsibilities and engaging all stakeholders; and more[18].

In contrast, the guiding principles of the current plan (2023-2026) shift away from detailing its implementation modalities to articulating what culture can contribute to society and why it is important. This Work Plan specifies, for instance, that 'freedom of artistic expression and creativity are fundamental to the human ability to address challenges, to think critically, to innovate and to invent'; and that cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue are crucial for promoting and protecting human rights, preventing and resolving conflicts, and fostering mutual understanding. The principles further affirm that 'culture makes a significant contribution to sustainable development, the economy and social inclusion, enhancing territorial cohesion', and that it 'has the potential to promote equality and mutual respect, and to fight against all

[17] Official Journal of the European Union 2014, Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on a Work Plan for Culture (2015-2018), C 463/4 - C 463/5

[18] Official Journal of the European Union 2018, Council conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022, C 460/13

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forms of violence, discrimination, intolerance and prejudice'. The sole reference to implementation in the plan is about the necessity for 'optimised use of quality data and statistics'[19].

'Intrinsic value' has been clearly featured in the EU's Work Plan for Culture since 2014, when the document put forward 'Intrinsic value of culture and the arts to enhance cultural diversity'[20]. 'Culture has an intrinsic value,' the first guiding principle of the Work Plan 2019-2022 stated[21], and its successor, the Plan adopted for the period 2023-2026, clarifies: 'Culture, including cultural heritage, has an intrinsic value and contributes to strengthening European identity'[22].

If we dive into how the rhetoric of the legal basis of Creative Europe evolved in the period between 2013 and 2021, we can also see that the framing of the value of culture featured in the 2021 Regulation is more multifaceted than the one in the Regulation adopted in 2013, with various new value fields mentioned, such as environment, human rights, and education.

Moreover, the second edition of the Creative Europe programme is expected to be consistent with more different policy areas than in 2013[23].

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[19] Official Journal of the European Union 2022, Council conclusions on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, C 466/3

[20] Official Journal of the European Union 2014, Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on a Work Plan for Culture (2015-2018), C 463/4

[21] Official Journal of the European Union 2018, Council conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022, C 460/13

[22] Official Journal of the European Union 2022, Council conclusions on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, C 466/3

[23] Official Journal of the European Union 2013, Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2014 to 2020) and repealing Decisions No 1718/2006/EC, No 1855/2006/EC and No 1041/2009/EC, L 347/230; Official Journal of

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Furthermore, in 2013, all priorities for the Culture sub-programme focused on the cultural and creative sectors themselves, featuring such aspects as skills development, international touring, events, exhibitions and festivals[24]. In contrast, in 2021, three out of seven priorities set for the Culture strand of Creative Europe are clearly external to cultural sectors: promoting societal resilience and enhancing social inclusion (1); strengthening European values and identity, and social resilience (2), and contributing to the Union's global strategy for international relations through culture (3), and one priority is focused both on the sectors themselves and their economic value: 'to enhance the capacity of the European cultural and creative sectors, including the capacity of individuals working in those sectors, to nurture talent, to innovate, to prosper and to generate jobs and growth'[25].

The economic aspect is present in both editions, but we can trace a slight difference in how it is framed: in 2013, main focus was placed on strengthening the business capacity and financial autonomy of the sector itself (with the focus on business and management models and alternative financing methodologies), while in 2021, there is more interest in how the sector can contribute to 'sustainable growth and job creation', and how 'the

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the European Union 2021, Regulation (EU) No 2021/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2021 to 2027) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013, L 189/51

[24] Official Journal of the European Union 2013, Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2014 to 2020) and repealing Decisions No 1718/2006/EC, No 1855/2006/EC and No 1041/2009/EC, art. 12

[25] Official Journal of the European Union 2021, Regulation (EU) No 2021/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2021 to 2027) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013, art. 5

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promotion of creativity and new knowledge contributes to boosting competitiveness and sparking innovation in industrial value chains'[26].

Instrumentalisation - a strategy, a compromise, or a deadlock?

It is important to note that we do not attempt to establish a clear-cut dichotomy between the external and intrinsic value of culture. Culture is not separate from society's political and social challenges; instead, it is very sensitive to them. The debate about culture's political and social role is especially relevant in times of crisis, and the discussion is often about how that role sits together with the intrinsic value. For instance, the 'Thinking Group' of the European Festivals Association wondered in their 70-Years-On Agenda whether the Association 'should increase its activist engagement and inspire its stakeholders to follow suit.' 'Or should festivals capitalise first and foremost on the intrinsic power of culture?' They further reflect on the dilemma that presents itself: 'The shift to the right in many parts of Europe may also lead festivals to focus more on art (and art alone) rather than a broader agenda'[27].

So, as culture advocates, we do not dream of erasing culture from important social and political debates. But we are aware that instrumentalisation as such is about how serving external goals can strip the sector of its own agency. In the cultural sector, we tend to agree that instrumentalisation of culture can be a compromise strategy for culture advocates but a problematic tendency for the cultural sector in the long term. The most ardent opponents of instrumentalisation warn that a high degree of it weakens the sell-sufficiency of cultural policy, dilutes its culture-specific objectives, and reduces culture to a means of achieving non-cultural ends.

One of the arguments is that while the cultural sector can make progress in various 'non-cultural' areas, its success in these fields can be limited or

[26] Ibid, L 189/35

[27] European Festivals Association 2023, 70-Years-On Agenda, Update 2023

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secondary compared to other sectors. Moreover, it is also recognised that these expected impacts typically lack tangible evidence[28].
Hyper-instrumentalism of cultural policy can also erode the validity of culture as an autonomous policy domain, reflected in the removal of culture-dedicated government bodies, or its merger with other departments[29], as well as the weakening or demolition of the arm's-length model[30]. Finally, instrumentalisation of culture does not only limit artistic autonomy[31], but also shifts the focus away from how cultural sectors operate and what they need, towards the specific policy outcomes expected from them. This affects the funding modalities, application processes and reporting requirements, as well as the broader understanding and perception of artistic and cultural labour, in particular such features as valuing experimentation, and the focus on predicting and modelling the final impact of artistic projects.

In our State of Culture Barometer survey[32] we asked respondents about the areas in which their organisation or activity contributes the most, and about the areas in which the role of their organisations is likely to become more prominent in the future. All response options were related to specific external areas, such as social inclusion, economic development, promoting the national image of their countries, rural development, and more. We formulated these options based on insights gathered from the review of national cultural policy agendas, reflecting how national governments typically frame the value of culture.

[28] Steven Hadley & Clive Gray (2017) Hyperinstrumentalism and cultural policy: means to an end or an end to meaning?, Cultural Trends, 26:2, 95-106, pp. 96-97 DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2017.1323836
[29] Ibid, p. 100
[30] Ibid, p. 104
[31] Whyatt, S 2022 Free to Create: Artistic Freedom in Europe, p. 40
[32] The survey was conducted as part of the State of Culture research process and collected 579 responses. See Annex for more details.

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While the majority of respondents answered the question without additional comments, a few struggled with it, perceiving it as either promoting heightened instrumentalisation of culture or lacking truly relevant options to choose from. They emphasised the importance of valuing culture for its intrinsic worth or suggested alternative ways to articulate culture's role. Comments such as 'Culture and art exist for their own sake - as art forms - and not as tools or products' and 'Culture cannot accomplish most of these tasks; at best, it can create a space where some of them may occur' were among the typical responses left in the comments field.

Several experts we interviewed as part of this research also expressed concerns about the irrelevance of the current approach to assessing cultural value through the lens of various other fields. 'I think we promised something that we couldn't really fulfil, and we act like we're not co-responsible for this', one of the interviewees said, explaining why, in their view, culture has been shoved to the bottom of policy priorities. They reflected that jumping from one advocacy narrative to another, for instance, from the industry perspective to the wellbeing card does not make much sense, as those areas tend to ultimately prove to be secondary to culture's real strength and value in society.

The problem appears to be not only the emphasis on non-cultural arguments, but a sole, rigorous, even blind focus on one or just a couple of these specific arguments, which ultimately distorts the real picture of what culture is all about. As one of the interview contributors noted: 'You cannot watch an elephant with a microscope', suggesting that it is important to move away from zooming into just one or very few values of culture, singling out its specific contributions, such as economic or social one. It is essential to take an approach which recognises the interconnectivity of all these values, and such an approach may be less of a scrutinising one, leaving more autonomy for the cultural sector.

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It seems that the concept of 'instrumentalisation' has gained a negative connotation in the cultural sector and academic circles. But has this trend solved anything for the political and social perception of culture, or let alone for the situation of the cultural sector?

On the question 'Do you agree that culture's role is sufficiently recognised in today's policy agendas?' only 5.5% of the State of Culture Barometer participants responded positively, and 15.3% said 'yes, but not in the right way'. Almost 80% answered the question negatively (with 55.6% of all respondents selecting 'Rather not', and 23.6% opting for 'Not at all').

Furthermore, respondents do not feel cultural and creative sectors are recognised by societies either, even if with a slightly less negative outlook. In total, 78% think societies do not sufficiently value cultural and creative sectors (with 54% of all respondents choosing 'Rather disagree' and 23.9% selecting 'Strongly disagree'[33]). Only 2.8% 'strongly agree', and 19.2% 'rather agree' with the statement.

Analysing the multiple contributions provided in the comment field, we can detect several levels at which the recognition gap plays out for our survey respondents. Firstly, many point out a distinct lack of consistency between the discursive recognition of the different values of culture, and the actual support provided to the sector. Respondents referred to the weak or non-existent protection systems for artists and cultural workers, dwindling budgets for culture, removal of art programmes from education curricula, and absence of the cultural sector at policy tables discussing crucial issues, even those affecting the sector directly, such as the development of the Artificial Intelligence (AI).

There are also the gaps between how much people appreciate culture and how much of the public budget they are ready to allocate to it: 'Population studies show that culture and arts are valued by society as a whole but

[33] The question was formulated as 'Do you agree that society sufficiently values the role of cultural and creative sectors (CCSs)'?

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there is disagreement to the extent of how much they should be publicly funded', a person from Northern Ireland shared.

Moreover, many respondents face a gap of understanding by societies and governments of what it takes to produce culture and to bring it to audiences, how the sector works or that art is actually a profession: 'Culture is considered a fun activity without any impact. The artist and culture workers are not supposed to have "real jobs"'; 'Culture in our country is considered as something that should be accessed for free and artist and cultural work is not valued rather considered to be a privilege'.

It appears contradictory to some respondents that the vocabulary on the many values culture brings to society becomes ever more detailed and developed, and yet this does not affect the perception of the sector as a professional segment of the labour market which needs regulatory protection and appropriate support. Some participants in the workshop we organised as part of Culture Action Europe's Beyond the Obvious conference emphasised the existence of an implementation gap: while culture may be featured in various policies, this often does not translate into the creation of concrete tools and programmes, nor the structured integration of the cultural sector into specific projects and agendas.

Is the picture really so grim? The data at hand suggests that the situation of the cultural and creative sectors in Europe, and globally, is not improving at a rapid pace, to put it mildly. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 10 million cultural jobs have disappeared in 2020 alone, exposing and worsening the vulnerabilities within the cultural sector[34]. Although many new policies and frameworks have been put in place to enhance the conditions for cultural workers, global studies consistently

[34] UNESCO 2022, Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity – Addressing culture as a global public good, p. 48

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reveal persistent structural weaknesses within the cultural ecosystem[35]. The recent survey on working conditions in the cultural and creative sectors conducted by Panteia and Culture Action Europe testifies that pursuing a career in these sectors remains to be a challenge: 68% of artists and creative professionals surveyed worked more than one job, with 34% of these second jobs being outside of the CCS; 71% indicated that they lack sufficient social protection; and 84% either 'strongly disagreeing' or 'disagreeing' with the statement 'I believe I am remunerated fairly for my work'[36].

It is also apparent, that despite the multiplying number of new studies and data piles on culture's role in social inclusion, urban development, economic growth, and many more - there is a general trend of public budgets for culture to decrease or stay stable. According to the data compiled by UNESCO, the global level of cultural investment has dropped in the last decade[37]. In the EU, the average level of government expenditure on cultural services does not exceed 0.5% of GDP, and this level has remained stable since 2014. Only in six countries of the EU, this indicator has slightly grown between 2014 and 2022 (on average by 0.2%), while in nine countries it has decreased, and in 12 member states it remained the same[38].

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[35] Examples of such studies include UNESCO's report on the implementation of the 1980 Recommendation on the Status of the Artist (2023), the EU's Report on Working Conditions (2023), the ILO paper on the African cultural and creative economy, and many national studies, such as the 'Good work review' by the Creative PEC (UK), report 'Profile of Creative Professionals New Zealand' by Creative New Zealand, Arts and Culture Barometer by the Arts and Culture Promotion Finland, and more.

[36] Panteia, Culture Action Europe 2024, Creative Pulse A survey on the status and working conditions of artists and CCS sector professionals in Europe, pp. 12, 18, 20

[37] UNESCO 2022, Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity – Addressing culture as a global public good, p. 34

[38] EUROSTAT 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/gov_10a_exp__custom_1111466

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There is also evidence that support for culture coming from other, non-cultural ministries remains to be limited. In 2022, UNESCO looked into how the parties to the 2005 Convention on Cultural Diversity cooperate with other ministries and government agencies on governing culture. It appeared that 96% of parties engage in inter-ministerial cooperation when designing regulations, laws, policies and strategies. However, only 6% of all policies and measures reported as direct support to the cultural and creative sectors involve one or more ministries without direct responsibility for these sectors[39].

At the same time, it is essential to recognise that culture has been included in a growing number of EU funding programmes over the years[40]. Furthermore, the Creative Europe programme saw a 67% budget increase, rising from €1.46 billion for the 2014-2020 period to €2.44 billion for 2021-2027. Despite this increase, Creative Europe remains relatively small compared to other programmes, given the scope and value of cultural contributions (for comparison, the budget for Erasmus+ for 2021-2027 is €26.2 billion, and Horizon Europe's budget is €95.5 billion). Furthermore, despite the Cultural Deal EU campaign and extensive evidence of the pandemic's devastating impact on the cultural sector, only 14 EU member states included culture in their National Resilience and Recovery Plans[41].

Furthermore, in more strategic and political terms, some researchers' analysis shows that culture is marginalised in mainstream development

7/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=97e0e001-2826-4d20-bafc-11e667bce4df

[39] UNESCO 2022 Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity – Addressing culture as a global public good, p. 49

[40] The European Commission's CulturEU funding guide, presenting EU Funding Opportunities for the Cultural and Creative Sectors 2021-2027, offers an overview of 20 different programmes (excluding Creative Europe).

[41] Culture Action Europe 2021, Culture in the EU's National Recovery and Resilience Plans, p. 5

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discourse[42], and culture's contribution to societal transformation processes is still largely undervalued or ignored in policy fields other than cultural policy, and even if culture might be mentioned or rhetorically recognised in environmental and industrial policies, it is typically not integrated in these frameworks in a substantial way[43].

So, it appears that the growing trend of promoting culture as a means to achieve non-cultural objectives does not help to anchor culture as an autonomous and equal player at the policy level, nor does it lead to the proportionately increasing support to the cultural sector.

However, promoting culture's value through its contribution to non-cultural ends still seems to be the most obvious advocacy path we pursue, probably as part of 'politics of survival' as Steven Hadley put it[44]. We can cite dozens of policy papers written by various cultural networks, including by Culture Action Europe, starting with a paragraph which would list the variety of rationales why policy-makers should pay attention to and continue reading this paper - basically arguments why culture is important, and none of these arguments would resemble a 'culture is its own right' notion. Sometimes we view this phenomenon as a communication exercise, believing we need to adjust our rhetoric to be understood by policymakers. However, the reality is that we are failing another important exercise: telling the story of what culture truly

[42] O'Connor, J 2024, Culture is not an Industry, p. 78

[43] A. M. Ranczakowska, M. Fraioli, A. Garma, Just Sustainability from the Heart of Communities. The Transformative Power of Socio-Cultural Centres, ENCC, May 2024, p. 15. Link: https://encc.eu/articles/qualitative-research-on-the-roles-of-socio-cultural-centres-in-just-sustainability-transitions. For further information please contact: office@encc.eu.

[44] Hadley, S Arts Professional, 4 October 2014, last seen 5 September 2024, https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/will-policy-trend-spell-end-arts-funding

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represents. Why do we struggle to propose an alternative approach which would go beyond 'spill-over effects' and the 'contributions to'?

A typical answer could be: 'Well, because no matter what other 'art for art's sake' argument we come up with, we are not going to be listened to'. Let's try to understand how we ended up in this situation.

Art for other sakes only: how did we get here?

There are various reasons why the instrumentalisation of culture has been gaining traction, which have been studied and discussed in academic, policy, and advocacy circles for many years. Here, we aim to outline some of the factors that emerged through our State of Culture research.

Perpetual state of emergency

Many experts we spoke to for this study said that they have noticed that these days, the position of culture is challenged by many other priorities governments juggle with. From rising military expenditure to social inequalities, from inflation spikes to natural disasters - today's decision-makers seem to be overwhelmed with concrete, immediate dangers to stability.

Indeed, we live in a time marked by multiple emergencies, including the climate crisis, social divides, terrorist attacks, armed conflicts, human displacement, health crises, economic slowdowns, and more. Experts and opinion-makers use various terms, such as 'polycrisis,' 'perma-crisis,' and 'meta-crisis,' to characterise our current reality[45]. The data indicates that it's not merely our heightened awareness causing increased concern about the future; the world is indeed experiencing an era that is objectively more challenging than preceding decades.

[45] Polycrisis n.d., last seen 5 September 2024, https://polycrisis.org/lessons/who-else-is-using-the-term-polycrisis-today/

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First of all, the escalating climate transformation and the governments' failure to slow it down are widely recognised and discussed: the COP 28 UN Climate Change Conference held in late 2023 concluded progress was too slow across all areas of climate action – from reducing greenhouse gas emissions, to strengthening resilience to a changing climate[46]. As the map of the Ecological Threat Report shows, climate change has been playing out differently across the world, with Africa, Asia and the Pacific region being in greatest danger. Yet, Europe is facing serious environmental threats too: in 2024, the European Environment Agency identified 36 major climate risks for Europe, and warned that the European states are not prepared for these risks[47]. Climate change is felt by people all across Europe, with 2023 having been the warmest year on record[48] and impacts of environmental disasters having grown considerably in the past 40 years[49].

A real war is unfolding on the borders of the European Union: Russia's aggression against Ukraine having profound impact on the EU's agenda and contributing to the sense that 'Europe is in danger', as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission Joseph Borell put it in

[46] United Nations Climate Change n.d., COP 28: What Was Achieved and What Happens Next?, last seen 5 September 2024, https://unfccc.int/cop28/5-key-takeaways#:~:text=Having%20shown%20that%20progress%20was,to%20accelerate%20action%20across%20all

[47] European Environment Agency, 28 June 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/topics/in-depth/climate-change-impacts-risks-and-adaptation?activeTab=07e50b68-8bf2-4641-ba6b-eda1afd544be

[48] Copernicus Climate Change Service 2023, pp. 3, 5

[49] European Environment Agency, 6 October 2023, Economic losses from weather- and climate-related extremes in Europe, last seen 5 September 2024, https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/indicators/economic-losses-from-climate-related.

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his speech in January 2024[50]. The instability is further aggravated by the conflict in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. In general, the Global Peace Index[51] has never been as alarming as it is this year, since its inception in 2008: there are currently 56 conflicts across the world, the most since World War II, and they have become more international with 92 countries involved in conflicts outside their borders[52].

These challenges, as well as other major trends, such the ageing of the European population, put significant pressures on the European economy[53]. The economic activity was in a state of stagnation in 2023. Despite some positive signs of the recovery of growth rates[54] and the gradual decrease of the EU-average inflation levels[55], international bodies, such as the International Monetary Fund, constatate that European

[50] European External Action Service - Europe between two wars, 3 January 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/europe-between-two-wars_en

[51] The Global Peace Index is a composite index measuring the peacefulness of countries made up of 23 quantitative and qualitative indicators, such as perceived criminality in society, homicides, jailed population, access to weapons, political instability, terrorist activity, military expenditure, external and internal conflicts fought, and more.

[52] Vision of Humanity, Key Trends in the Global Peace Index 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/

[53] International Monetary Fund 2024, Regional Economic Outlook Europe,Soft Landing in Crosswinds for a Lasting Recovery, p. 5

[54] European Commission - Economy and Finance, 15 May 2024, Spring 2024 Economic Forecast: A gradual expansion amid high geopolitical risks, last seen 5 September 2024, https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-forecast-and-surveys/economic-forecasts/spring-2024-economic-forecast-gradual-expansion-amid-high-geopolitical-risks_en

[55] Eurostat, HICP - monthly data (annual rate of change), 2 July 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/prc_hicp_manr/default/table?lang=en

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governments have a lot of work to be done to make their economic development more sustainable[56]. Mario Draghi, the former European Central Bank chief and Italian prime minister, who was asked by the European Commission to produce the report on European competitiveness, predicts a 'slow agony' for the EU economy if radical measures, including massive investments, are not implemented[57].

In the meantime, another trend - the digital transformation - has reached its unprecedented pace. It is not seen solely as a problem; however, the discourse framing 'digital revolution' as an opportunity has long been counterbalanced by the perception of it as a potential threat and a source of disruption[58].

How does this backdrop impact our perception of reality? As one may guess and sense for themselves, not in the most positive way. Climate anxiety has become a significant trend for the European population, especially among younger people[59]. Some surveys show that many people

[56] International Monetary Fund 2024, Regional Economic Outlook Europe,Soft Landing in Crosswinds
for a Lasting Recovery, p. 5

[57] EU Debates / eudebates.tv, 10 September 2024, European economy faces 'existential challenge,' Draghi warns Europe!, last seen 17 September 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9Tz6DoCYwY

[58] World Economic Forum, 27 February, last seen 5 September 2024, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/02/this-timeline-charts-the-fast-pace-of-tech-transformation-across-centuries/

[59] European Union - European Climate Pact, Anxious about climate change? Here's what you can do about it, 30 January 2023, last seen 5 September 2024, https://climate-pact.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/anxious-about-climate-change-heres-what-you-can-do-about-it-2023-01-30_en

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are increasingly more fearful about the future, thinking that the financial situation will be worse for their children and grandchildren[60].

The multiplicity of interrelated disasters facing Europe and the world contributes to the political sense of the time running out and the narrow space for a mistake. This, undoubtedly, has a profound effect on policymaking - from setting priorities and shaping agendas to allocating budgets and selecting stakeholders to be around the table. The political discourse has increasingly become a warning of a 'now or never' moment[61]. 'The world is at the crossroads', the first thing we read on the webpage of the UN's Pact for the Future[62]. Ursula von der Leyen's Statement at the European Parliament Plenary on 18 June 2024, the day she was reelected as the European Commission President, says: 'Choices are the hinges of destiny. And in a world full of adversity, Europe's destiny hinges on what we do next. Despite the momentous things we have done and overcome, Europe now faces a clear choice'[63].

Johnathan White, Professor of Politics of the London School of Economics, described the tactics and strategies of governments in the present 'age of

[60] Clancy, L, Gray, R & Vu, B Pew Research Center, Large shares in many countries are pessimistic about the next generation's financial future, 11 August 2022, last seen 5 September 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/08/11/large-shares-in-many-countries-are-pessimistic-about-the-next-generations-financial-future/

[61] White, J 2024, In the Long Run. Future as a Political idea, p. 162

[62] Summit of the Future, Pact for the Future, last seen 17 September 2024, https://summitofthefutureun.org/pact/?_gl=1*1sudin4*_ga*MjA5OTI3MzI5MC4xNzE2NDY0NTA4*_ga_TK9BQL5X7Z*MTcyNjU2NTY3NC4xNC4xLjE3MjY1NjU2ODYuMC4wLjA.

[63] European Commission 18 July 2024, Statement at the European Parliament Plenary by President Ursula von der Leyen, candidate for a second mandate 2024-2029, last seen 5 September 2024, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-european-parliament-plenary-president-ursula-von-der-leyen-candidate-second-mandate-2024-2024-07-18_en

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emergencies' in his book 'In the Long Run. The Future as a Political Idea'. According to him, in a volatile world, policymaking becomes responding to necessity rather than pursuing chosen goals; short-term predictions are more reliable and pertinent than long-term thinking; and the major focus is placed on immediate and practical steps[64]. He further reflects:

> *Whenever we are short of time, we tend to evaluate things for their utility. The meals we eat quickly are valued less for the pleasure they give than for the hunger they satisfy and the energy they provide. The umbrella we buy when caught in a downpour is picked less for its looks than its capacity to keep us dry*[65].

There is something about the impact of culture that is hard to demonstrate and promote as essential in such a political climate. In the last two decades, evaluation and measurement of the impact of art and culture were widely recognised as challenging tasks, to put it mildly, especially with the tools and metrics used by governments to detect 'tangible', quantifiable impacts[66]. Even more so today, as Europe is evidently shaken by too many emergencies, the genuine value of culture, such as being an essential part of people's life and a vital element of social foundations, is hard to trace with tools of short-term, emergency-driven strategies.

An important part of the story is the longevity of culture's impact. Many of our survey respondents struggled with the idea of expecting a direct, immediate social endorsement of what they are doing. As one of the respondents put it: 'As a writer my role is to create, not change society. History will judge my work'.

[64] White, J 2024, In the Long Run. Future as a Political idea, pp. 162-165.
[65] Ibid, p. 187
[66] Eliassen, K, Hovden, J, & Prytz, Ø (eds.), Contested Qualities, Negotiating Value in Arts and Culture, p. 229

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Justine O'Connor, Professor of Cultural Economy at the University of South Australia, in his book 'Culture is not an Industry' talks about the different 'temporalities of impact', referring to how culture is more of a component of the long-term 'social reproduction of life' rather than a response to immediate need. O'Connor warns, however, that these temporalities of impact should not be establishing the hierarchy of what is important based on how quickly its impact can be seen[67].

It is hard to disagree that societies often take much longer to notice the degradation of the cultural sphere in their country compared to the decay of food logistics, healthcare, or education systems. Yet, looking back at history, each era often emerges for us through the lens of the artistic movements of that time, alongside other scientific and technological advancements. Whether it's the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, pop-art of the 50s, or the counterculture of the 1960s, it is clear art played a crucial role in Europe's progress in history and the development of critical thought.

On the contrary, if we try to capture the immediate, 'here and now' role of artists in today's reality, this role seems rather ephemeral, or to say the least, debatable. The ambiguity that the arts are naturally giving space to can be a helpful model for dealing with the complexity of our living together in today's world. Yet ephemeral, debatable, ambiguous are not the characteristics policy-making in times of emergency leans towards. On the contrary, today, there might be an unprecedented quest for clarity and predictability. As White put it, 'calculating the future means identifying key measures of success and policies that can lead to their demonstrable attainment. It means leaving out the messier stuff - the things on which people disagree, and the ways in which values and deeper structures might change'[68].

[67] O'Connor 2024, Culture is not an Industry, p. 112

[68] White, J 2024, In the Long Run. Future as a Political idea, p. 166

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If history is to judge culture's value, it will certainly do so. However, present-day politics, driven by emergencies and calculations, tend to overlook or misunderstand this value. Could this be why we are pressured to abandon culture's intrinsic worth and instead chase (the illusion of) its multiple external benefits - those that can be clear and concrete?

Imagination replaced by calculation

We asked the State of Culture Barometer survey respondents how they think the culture value gap should be addressed. The majority of survey respondents (almost one third) believe that to fix the problem of culture's recognition in society, a social and political transformation is needed. One of the survey respondents, who 'rather disagrees' with the statement that culture is sufficiently valued by societies, wrote: 'Unfortunately, Western(ised) society is burdened with the mentality of attaching economic value to every aspect of existence'.

Many of the people we spoke to as part of the interview series, agreed that there is indeed something wrong with the 'system'. Yet some pointed out that culture might be a 'special outcast' of this system, more so compared to other fields. 'We live in neoliberal society that is obsessed with numbers', one of our contributors said, further reflecting on how such society shows a high degree of distrust towards culture:

> *Look at the medicine sector: there is an accepted possibility for side effects for every medication. But if a cultural project deviates from the originally planned design, or fails, there might even be a need to return the money. Culture does not fall under the umbrella of a direct value exchange.*

One of the (old) explanations for this could be that culture is hard to measure in quantitative terms, which makes it especially vulnerable on the political priority ladder of the systems where calculation is the key means of decision making. Yes, medicine tends to produce side-effects, but the probability of those can be quantified. The impact of a cultural project is

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much harder to forecast, and this is the problem. Moreover, forecasting such impacts might be counter-intuitive and even harmful for the cultural project itself. As written in IETM's publication 'Lost in Transition?' which captured voices of over 150 performing arts professionals:

> *Art should remain liberated from assumptions about communities, avoiding the reinforcement of societal compartmentalisation. While it is common for policies to outline aims and target audiences, it is equally reasonable for artists not to predetermine who will engage with and benefit the most from their work*[69].

This goes at odds with the tendency to calculate and forecast which has been gaining ground since centuries. Jonathan White points to the overshadowing of 'imagined futures' by 'calculated' ones - a trend which is not only connected to emergencies and crises but also to a broader system defining how politics operate today. 'It has been a money economy which filled the daily life of so many people with weighting, calculating, enumerating and the reduction of qualitative values to quantitative terms'[70]. This tendency gave ground for the growing number of various forecasting techniques used by governments, studies of consumer behaviours, predictions of market dynamics, opinion polls, and more. White further reflects that 'a desire to apply calculative techniques encouraged a focus on the things that can be measured' and gave priority to relatively short-term perspectives, simply because they are easier to forecast compared to long-term outlooks requiring speculation[71].

However, even when it comes to long-term perspectives and to something that is much more complex and overarching than a number-based target, it is still often spelled out in quantitative terms. 'Even climate change, that

[69] IETM 2024, Lost in Transition. Report from the IETM Focus Luxembourg Meeting, p. 18.
[70] White, J 2024, In the Long Run. Future as a Political idea, p. 62.
[71] Ibid, pp. 78, 81.

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most profound of threats, tends to be turned into a problem of calculation in policy-making circles', brushing away a range of other sustainability-related concerns and compromising a system vision of the problem[72]. Interpreting progress or achievement of success through quantitative targets became a trend in many other fields, including ours: think of the campaign led by Culture Action Europe advocating for 2% for culture in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans[73].

As cultural policy is tuned to serve multiple external goals, cultural activities and practices have come under the quantitative measurement. For example, the European Commission has established a comprehensive set of indicators to assess the Creative Europe programme, described as 'qualitative and quantitative' in both the 2013 and 2021 Regulations establishing the two editions of the programme. However, in the 2013 Regulation, all 18 indicators primarily focus on numerical data[74]. In 2021, while there is now an indicator for 'success stories', the majority of indicators remain predominantly quantitative[75]. Moreover, these indicators are designed to allow for short evaluation periods, with beneficiaries required to demonstrate their achievements in the final project report at its conclusion.

[72] Ibid p. 167

[73] Culture Action Europe, 17 November 2020, Open Letter | European Recovery and Resilience Plans and Civil Society, last seen 5 September 2024, https://cultureactioneurope.org/news/open-letter-european-recovery-and-resilience-plans-and-civil-society/

[74] Official Journal of the European Union 2013, Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2014 to 2020) and repealing Decisions No 1718/2006/EC, No 1855/2006/EC and No 1041/2009/EC, art. 18

[75] Official Journal of the European Union 2021, Regulation (EU) No 2021/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2021 to 2027) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013, art. 3, Annex II

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But if we want to capture the real and full value of culture, it is neither about the short-term nor - and even less so - about the quantitative. The world of culture, composed of symbolic expressions, objects, images, melodies, stories, movements, styles, techniques, practices, and more, offers more of an 'imagined future' rather than a 'calculated one', and drives a long-term shaping of social foundations.

Culture is about activating societies, but in the words of White, 'an active public is one of the many things that can make the world more unpredictable'[76]. This might be one of the reasons why instead of cherishing that perspective on the long-term, imagined and unexpected elements of our life, we are pushed to regard it as part of the calculated and forecasted system.

But does the cultural sector itself play any role in shaping the policy rhetoric about culture and art?

Staying true to who we are, or trapped by self-instrumentalisation?

There is a wide-spread opinion that these are the cultural policies and funders' pressures that make the cultural sector tick the various boxes of social cohesion, wellbeing, innovation, economic development, urban regeneration and many more, often at the cost of their artistic worth. An interviewee referred to the homogenisation of the cultural offer fostered by the overprescription of the culture funding programmes, all putting forward similar expectations driven mainly by instrumental approach to culture and art. IETM's report 'Lost in Transition?' states: 'Cultural policy

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must allow art to be unexpected again'[77], as an appeal to put an end to the hyper-instrumentalisation of art.

But what if there is also something about today's art and the art institutions themselves that makes the discourse on culture instrumental or at least nourishes the ongoing instrumentalisation of cultural policy?

Some scepticism towards the tactics and strategies of the cultural sectors themselves has been expressed in the survey comments. Respondents refer to the lack of self-confidence within the sector to be an agent of transformation, and many talk about the disconnectedness of the cultural sector with societies: 'We are not learning to drive forward discussions and are instead reacting to requests. It is important that we start to develop a new message and new picture of the future, rather than depend on what may or may not have worked in the past'; 'CCSs should become drivers of technological change instead of adapting to technological disruptions. CCSs must be the disruption instead of facing the disruption'.

To understand what is in reality happening, let us for a moment shift away from advocacy to the arts.

For a few years now, a growing number of art critics and cultural experts discuss the general standstill or inertia of cultural progress characterising our age. For them today's 'state of culture', mostly referring to the Western culture, is not more than the perpetual recycling of the artistic innovations of the past decades and centuries, a replication of tried-out styles and pathways. They talk about 'cultural stagnation', 'monoculture', 'cultural inertia', 'cultural immobility', even 'cultural sclerosis'[78].

[77] IETM 2024, Lost in Transition. Report from the IETM Focus Luxembourg Meeting, p. 6.

[78] See, for example, articles 'The Age of Cultural Stagnation' by Aaron Timms and 'Why Culture Has Come to a Standstill' by Jason Farago; and books 'The

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Jason Farago, an art critic for The New York Times, wrote in October 2023: 'Today culture remains capable of endless production, but it's far less capable of change', referring to the erosion of the arts' capacity to renew its forms and styles[79]. Claiming that our era will be 'the least innovative, least transformative, least pioneering century for culture since the invention of the printing press', Farago reflects on how present times miss the previous centuries' radical renewal of artistic languages and styles:

> *When you walk through your local museum's modern wing, starting with Impressionism and following a succession of avant-gardes through the development of Cubism, Dada, Pop, minimalism, in the 1990s you arrive in a forest called "the contemporary," and after more than 30 years no path forward has been revealed*[80].

In resonance with Farago's ideas, Aaron Timm, New York-based author, wrote in March 2024: 'From the academic heights to popular bestsellers, from Christian theology to secular fashion, from political theory to pop music, a range of cultural forms and intellectual pursuits have been stuck for decades in a pattern of recurrence'[81], and provocatively wondered: 'We are stuck, progress has stopped, culture is bad, and it's someone else's fault. But whose?'.

For Kyle Chayka, author of the book 'Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture', one of the major reasons for this development is the

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Decadent Society: how we became the victims of our own success' by Ross Douthat and 'Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture' by Kyle Chayka.

[79] Farago, J Why Culture Has Come to a Standstill, The New York Times Magazine, 10 October 2023, last seen 5 September 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/magazine/stale-culture.html

[80] Ibid

[81] Timms, A The Age of Cultural Stagnation, The New Republic, 19 March 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, https://newrepublic.com/article/179432/age-cultural-stagnation

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influence of the Big Tech and the algorithmic system they have imposed on producers and consumers of the cultural content - both now stripped of their 'vitality and individuality'. For an artistic work to achieve commercial success, it must be tailored to maximise engagement on digital platforms, often resulting in the creation of many similar-looking and sounding pieces. In the meantime, as people's cultural consumption is closely intertwined with the Internet and the algorithms governing it, the version of culture they are encountering is replicable and accessible, rather than challenging and disturbing. Indeed, platforms are not interested in 'adventurous directions'; they are interested in high numbers of users[82].

Farago also talks about how the modalities of the Big Tech platform culture are pushing cultural producers to make clearer, more communicable, more taggable content, in order to be embraced by the platforms, suggested to or discovered by consumers. He also highlights a few other reasons for why we are not living through cultural revolutions anymore: there is a general slowdown of breakthroughs compared to previous centuries; and the plunge into an 'infinity of information' driven yet again by the Internet - the new reality, in which information can surpass the limits of time, 'everything is recorded, nothing is remembered', and, in this sense, the notion of 'an era' is losing its significance.

Finally, for Fagaro, the very urge to be innovative, which has been a trend of cultural development since at least a century, is the factor that suffocates progress. 'To audiences in the 20th century, novelty seemed to be a cultural birthright'. It might be true that something is recognised as 'art' only because it is unique and offers something new compared to what people have already seen. Today's decay of stylistic innovation has not, however, helped the world of culture to emancipate from this 'modernist trap'. Driven by the innovation hunger and 'commitment to novelty', cultural producers and institutions are now more interested in delving into new topics rather than inventing new forms and styles. According to

[82] Ibid

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Fagaro, this shift of the expectation of new stories vs new languages to tell them nourished the interest of young people in political activism ('plant a tree and call it a sculpture'), and the focus on socially-engaged issues:

> *This evangelical turn in the arts in the 21st century has been conflated with the long-overdue admission of women, people of colour and out sexual minorities into the culture industry [...]. A gay rom-com is trotted out as "the first"; a Black Little Mermaid is a "breakthrough"; our museums, studios and publishing houses can bring nothing new to market except the very people they once systematically excluded*[83].

In other words, while socially- or politically engaged work is certainly valuable, the problem lies in the growing (self-)expectation within and from the cultural sector to address particular topics, tell specific stories, for the sake of being fresh and thus relevant.

Can it be that this trend of cultural decay amidst enduring commitment to novelty has also been conflated with the systemic quest for calculation, clarity, predictability and communicability that we discussed above? Has it also resonated with the emergency and crisis politics which does not see value in anything that is not immediately useful and easily comprehensible?

Fatoş Üstek, an independent curator and writer, reflected in her book 'The Art Institution of Tomorrow: Reinventing the Model' that amidst the multilayered global crisis, art institutions are in stagnation, 'fixated on their current circumstances'. They are also challenged by the fact that, in the digital age - when everyone has a platform to express their opinions -

[83] Farago, J Why Culture Has Come to a Standstill, The New York Times Magazine, 10 October 2023, last seen 5 September 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/magazine/stale-culture.html

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there is much more scrutiny of art institutions' actions[84]. Üstek reflects further:

> *The consequence of institution's constraining finances, underpaid and overworked staff, authoritarian demeanour, archaic operational frameworks, and financial dependencies all play a crucial role. I believe the majority of art institutions are at the moment standing still in the fear of any movement that might precipitate their demise. It is painful to see art institutions in this frozen state, lacking the resourcefulness to imagine new horizons*[85].

One of the values of the world of culture and art - being unexpected - has been losing its vitality in present systems. Out of survival instinct, culture has slowly abandoned its 'sense of self', as Timms put it, its self-confidence, and is now giving in to its position of being 'subordinate to higher forces'[86].

Certainly, the message is not that the art and culture field must abandon its social and political role and withdraw into its own world. The worrying trend, on the contrary, is that this role - or the perception of it, even within the sector itself - is becoming blurred and watered down.
In times of disruption, this lack of self-worth can be especially pronounced. One of the manifestations of it was the provocative statement by Ariane Mnoushkine, French stage director, who said to 'Liberation': 'People are fed up with us [the art sector - E.P.], with our helplessness, our

[84] Üstek, F 2024 'The Art Institution of Tomorrow: Reinventing the Model', pp. 11, 12
[85] Ibid, p. 12
[86] Timms, A The Age of Cultural Stagnation, The New Republic, 19 March 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, https://newrepublic.com/article/179432/age-cultural-stagnation

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fears, our narcissism, our sectarianism, our denials'[87], after the French right-wing party National Rally achieved its highest-ever result in a nationwide election in June 2024 and the President Emanulle Macron dissolved the Parliament.

How can culture escape algorithmic capitalism, the overall obsession with measurements and calculations, the politics of catastrophe and urgency, and finally the growing uncertainty about its own worth?

Perhaps, a starting point should be the restoration of this eroded 'sense of self'. As O'Connor put it: 'start by asking yourself and answering, as a collective, some fundamental questions: What are we for? What do we stand for? What is our most essential contribution? Politics change, narratives shift. Start with consolidating your own understanding of what your value is'[88].

In resonance with this, during our Malmö workshop as part of Culture Action Europe's Beyond the Obvious annual conference, one of the participants, observing the dynamics and moods of the discussions, reflected:

> *'When asked to discuss our transformative value as a cultural sector, we are inspired and brimming with ideas. However, when it comes to envisioning how governments can harness this power, our enthusiasm wanes, our vocabulary shifts, and we start speaking a different language,*

[87] Pillet, E «Narcissique», «sectaire», «dans le déni»... La culture est inoffensive face au RN, selon Ariane Mnouchkine et Éric Ruf, Le Figaro, 18 June 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, https://www.lefigaro.fr/culture/narcissique-sectaire-dans-le-deni-la-culture-est-inoffensive-face-au-rn-selon-ariane-mnouchkine-et-eric-ruf-20240618

[88] Polivtseva, E 'Culture as an Industry Won't Solve Sector's Problems', 4 July 2024, Culture Policy Room, last seen 5 September 2024, https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/if-culture-is-not-an-industry-what-is-it-then

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emphasising other values. Shouldn't we strive to stay true to who we are, regardless of whom we are speaking to?'

We will explore rethinking the narratives in our final chapter. For now, let's examine the other issues the cultural sector faces today. To do this, we'll shift our focus from how culture is perceived and framed by the cultural sector, society, and politics, to some of the major global trends and developments that have the greatest impact on the cultural sector today.

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