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“Private patrons in Quebec need to give more to culture as well as to education,” the Minister of Culture and Communications, Hélène David, has said.¹ Where does this apparent need come from, and just what political horizon does it belong to? At a time when cultural policies accommodate collaborations between art and business to the point of making them – in certain cases – indispensable, how can we, artists and arts workers, ensure that our autonomy is not undermined, and that inequity does not dig its heels any deeper in our communities?

At this discussion table of the Journée sans culture, we wanted to create a moment of collective reflection that allowed us to better understand the mechanisms regulating issues of private patronage and their effects on art. This text, written between two people, is not a faithful portrait of the all too many subtleties and disparities that came up, but it does mean to convey some of the anxieties, tensions and hopes being lived within our milieu.

THE IMPERATIVE OF AUTONOMY: THE MAKEUP OF GOVERNING BOARDS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Autonomy is a good excuse. It’s oddly instructive to see how the state, like the advocates of its withdrawal, sprinkle this word here and there like an insecticide to stamp out the crime of freeloading. Suddenly the arts milieu needs to give proof that it is autonomous – by which one should hear *financially self-sufficient*, because autonomy here is certainly not about being autonomous in our (self-)management and organization.

First there’s the famed call to engage in independent fundraising (*financement autonome*), an obligation of increasing importance for cultural organizations wishing to access public funding. For example, this requirement has climbed from 10% to 20% of a project’s overall budget in just a few years, according to the

standards set by the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ). So here we are, fighting tooth and nail to make more sales and solicit more donations : but sales of what, and donations from whom? That’s the crux of the question. At this table of the Journée sans culture we heard of some organizations that sold cheese, and of others that were contemplating opening a bar – all of which had zero to do with their mandate or their skills. One suggestion by a well-intentioned public servant: to organize golf tournaments.

Likewise, we are encouraged (and sometimes required, in the case of the Conseil des arts de Montréal) to expand our networks; one has to, as the saying goes, “diversify” one’s funding sources and develop new partnerships. By doing so, are we doing anything other than court-ing the private sector?

Together, all these little intrusions – the move to independent fundraising, which encourages the adoption of a for-profit business model; the search for partnerships and sponsorships that make us accountable to contributors who rarely have art as their primary objective; the reliance on administrators whose knowledge of the arts milieu plays second fiddle to managerial demands – show how artists’ capacity to define their needs and aspirations is being whittled down, surely and with speed.

The present shift may be shocking, and it may be pushing us into precarious situations where not everyone will get the right footing, but it has the advantage of forcing us to ask the question: Who does our work serve? What interests do we serve? The message that some arts councils are sending to cultural organizations to name more business people to their boards can be cast in the opposite direction: when will artists come to sit on businesses’ governing boards? The financial autonomy that is being imposed gives way to a sort of administrative paternalism that completely disregards cultural workers’ proven capacity to govern themselves, even as they are busy performing miracles with the thinnest of budgets.

In the face of the various encroachments on our autonomy, JSC participants insisted on certain basic facts. For example, organizations should be free to determine the composition of their boards in keeping with their mandates and their needs, rather than having to heed the cookie-cutter requirements of arts councils. The expectations of these same councils with regards to independent fundraising could be adjusted to what’s actually feasible, in light of the size and mission of the organizations concerned. Because for most – if not all – the scramble for dollars and cents has become a permanent and also often an unrealistic job.

PRESUMING ARTISTS’ DEPENDENCE, TO BETTER BE RID OF IT

“No one says the nurses are dependents of the state,” retorted one participant to another, who believes instead that “we have to be done with this dependence on the state which only puts us in a degrading position.”

Throughout the day the discussion brought us uncontrollably back to the thorny question of dependence, a status that’s supposedly the opposite of autonomy. Our milieu can’t imagine itself outside of this question. Some pin it on public opinion (“artists only know how to live off the handouts of the state...”). Others hold the state itself responsible for putting the milieu on such a paralyzing and narrow track. By what actions? During our discussions we focused on untangling those government programs whose stated aims are to ease “dependence” on public coffers, inciting us to find other sources.

The Mécénat Placements Culture program (PMPC) of the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications du Québec is an excellent example of this logic at work. The program introduces a matching game: if cultural organizations manage to find private financing, the government will reward them by doubling or tripling that gain. Public support is understood here as a “counterpart” to private investment, upon which it becomes entirely dependent. In this way, the milieu’s dependence is transferred but not wiped out; it’s even exacerbated, triggering a race to find private patrons. That the PMPC’s funding (\$5 million)² comes from a tax on tobacco products only intensifies the feeling that one dependence can’t be tapered without encouraging another. Should one be speaking of the goodwill on the part of the state? So long as cultural policies try to soothe us with band-aid solutions – which might ensure our survival but not our vitality – our position as the standard bearers of dependence will remain unchanged. The state’s goodwill is a paltry screen that blocks our ability to consider art as a truly public function.

The state and its partners have proven evasive on the reasons for stimulating private funding. They are most often framed in terms of Quebec’s perceived “lag” in comparison to other provinces³ – the same argument that was brandished to justify the 2012 tuition hikes. The financial precarity of artists and cultural organizations have also been appealed to,⁴ without however considering the possibility that the state – and not the private sector – should be responsible for mitigating this dire instability.

Among the demands that arts councils place on organizations, urging them to ratchet up their independent funding and to multiply their

partnerships highlights yet another abstruse requirement: that the arts must prove their economic viability. In a complete reversal of the fundamental principle of public services – to collectively support what the market cannot or will not – it seems that the preference of the state today is to support those who need it least (see PMPC above). And yet, how much we would prefer to thrive, rather than being condemned to merely survive!

“A mining company had just weathered a scandal. I found it gross that our organization would solicit money from this company. But we did it. The company wanted to spruce up its image.”

The race for private funding is in no way regulated by an ethical framework. Wouldn’t you look a gift horse in the mouth?⁵ Who in the arts is willing to compromise their ethics under the pretense that this is what precarity leads to anyway? At the discussion we went further: dire insecurity does not make our judgement any less discerning, but sometimes it does make it difficult to reconcile these judgements with action. Learning to pass up the chance to be loved by those who we don’t love ourselves is an act of resistance. Loving oneself may mean rejecting those companies that love us mostly for our purifying powers. Retraction is an admirable idea, but it’s less perilous to retract as a group, some say. Retraction, not for misery’s sake, but to recover our integrity in a withholding that would deny the powerful the ability to dictate our well-being.

“But private patrons love art and want to protect it!”

Giving does one good. Giving leads to happiness. The president of the Canada Council for the Arts, the well-to-do Pierre Lassonde⁶, put his finger on this eye-opening phenomenon: “I have never known a patron who is not pleased by giving to art!” The studies that corroborate the close connection between donation and pleasure, between donation and recognition, and especially between donation and growth (supporting the arts incites economic growth and the vitality of cities, and by extension increases our shared economic potential) are flourishing. Philanthropists too are flourishing and witnessing the rejuvenation of their ranks. They are rallying together, and their generosity is being met with public blessings – prizes sometimes seal the deal.⁷ Who would want to rain on this joyful parade? Nobody.

Yet, heartwarming as the generosity of the rich may be, it distracts us from the bare reality where this display takes place. Because, truth be told, what binds the arts milieu above all is the mutual support between art workers. What if we were the principal patrons of the

arts? Our patronage, continuous but seldom ledgered, takes various forms: volunteer hours at the desk, unpaid internships, sitting on boards and committees, participating in studies, being at cultural mediation events, donating works to charity auctions, speaking up in public forums, etc. – without mentioning the chronic underpayment for creative work. We are among the first to donate to our colleagues’ crowdfunding campaigns. The creation of the milieu’s wealth, mostly through this “gift system”, deserves little praise – and seeks it even less. Since we were of the same mind on this point we asked ourselves: can private patrons get pleasure from giving anonymously? Can they go without plaques and tributes, without having buildings and fountains and auditoriums – every inch of public space – established in their names? A sad fact: while paying taxes might be the selfless gift *par excellence*, it cannot for the well-off be the conduit of pleasure so long as donors are denied the gratification of cherry-picking the “deserving” or of inscribing their names in an honorary plaque.

The idea of forging alliances with businesses and private donors was rejected wholeheartedly by only a few participants at the JSC, but everyone agreed about one thing: that this form of funding cannot replace public support. Both have ways of impinging on our practices and activities, but only of public funding can we demand a responsibility to serve the common good rather than private interests. We can demand that public funders conduct themselves with transparency, and we have the power as citizens to criticize and change those mechanisms if needed. Conversely, businesses that donate to the arts do not convene peer juries; the dubious Cercle de jeunes mécènes certainly hasn’t, even though it is backed (and hence legitimized) by the Conseil des arts de Montréal. Private patrons and businesses set the criteria for the funding they give, and society has no say in it.

How can we detach donation from the logic of sponsorship and bring it closer to a disinterested social function, without at the same time diminishing the impulse to give – which would be impossible, and undesirable in the end? Some ideas were heard: giving directly to the arts councils, establishing a Quebec-based foundation for the arts with peer committees, proposing a non-compulsory arts tax, or indexing admission prices at cultural events to income in order to foster the financial participation of the most well-off. Though they reroute the pleasure of donating towards more collective structures, these proposals ultimately do little to question the principle that contribution to the arts should be a private, individual gesture – a liberal idea that is the opposite of taxation.

THE WAGER OF AUSTERITY: MANAGERIAL VERSUS POLITICAL ACTION?

The discussions at the table wavered between two postures – and two constraints, or desires. The first, pragmatic, a struggle with the bare and ordinary need to come up with a balanced budget; the anxiety in this regard is palpable, and the flow of funding – which is always on the verge of being shut off – forces everyone to scramble for sources.

“The state no longer has the means” is a phrase that has deftly found its way into everyone’s hearts and minds like an inviolable mantra. By swallowing this assumption of a deficit that’s impossible to fix other than by cutting expenses (or rather, by cutting some well-chosen expenses), we also accept to retreat from the political sphere: we accept that we are merely administrators of decisions that are made higher up. Such decisions include tax cuts, for example, particularly for corporations and the wealthy: if “the state no longer has the means,” it is simply because it has chosen not to collect them. This state of affairs appears clearly in arts council exhortations to seek money from the deep pockets of the private sector. Doing so only limns the path to the revenues that the government itself could collect – and has formerly collected more liberally. The money exists: it resides where the state – and, by extension, society – has ceased pursuing it.

“Why do we invest ourselves so deeply in our practices? I’m under the impression that it stems from the feeling that we must preserve what’s crumbling all around us: the notion of the common good. If we don’t do it, who will?”

This notion of the commons was palpable throughout the day’s discussions. In contrast to the rumours that frame artistic creation as a hobbyist’s self-serving pleasure, those in attendance wish to stand for a structure that benefits everyone, even if they, as workers, have only ever known it to be a source of meagre profits and endless headaches. The market economy’s accretion in the cultural realm has decimated attachment to the commons, one of the most central incentives of our dedication. Why devote one’s efforts to the defence of a culture only to see it become one of many products?

As far as the erosion of solidarities is concerned, various solutions were proposed at the table. The possibility of uniting logistical forces was evoked: pooling the resources of certain organisations (communications, fundraising research and other cheese-sale solutions), so that everyone can focus on what they do best. Another proposition is a more global consideration of the presence and value of the arts in

society, a task that ought to begin in the most basic educational settings, rather than being transferred to the already critically-underfunded arts milieu as a last resort. We were also reminded of the crucial notion of a society supported by taxes and proper wealth redistribution, the only bulwark against the transformation of art into a luxuriant plaything of the elite.

Mostly, we must endow ourselves with the power to refuse certain things, and in so doing, to remind first of all ourselves, as well as the institutions that support us, of the reasons for our work. Best to look this gift horse in the mouth, if only to see who's holding the bridle.

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1. Julie Barlow, "La culture à l'heure de l'austérité," *L'actualité*, October 1, 2015.
2. In 2013, the PQ government announced the creation of the Fonds Avenir Mécénat Culture to secure the revenues from the Mécénat Placement Culture program, itself founded in 2005. The fund was to receive an envelope of \$5 million drawn from the tax on tobacco products. Philippe Couillard's Liberal government extended this allocation in its first budget (2014-2015). The Fonds' allocation (and that of the PMPC) remained at \$5 million in the 2016-2017 budget. Sources: Parti Québécois, *Dépôt du budget 2014-2015: Maîtres et prospères chez nous*, press release, February 1, 2014; Ministère de la Culture et des Communications du Québec, "Fonds Avenir Mécénat Culture. La ministre Hélène David annonce un montant de 5 M\$ pour favoriser le mécénat culturel," press release, October 8, 2015; Gouvernement du Québec, *Budget de dépenses 2016-2017. Budget des fonds spéciaux*, 2016.
3. See Ministère des finances et de l'économie, Groupe de travail sur la philanthropie culturelle, *Vivement, pour une culture philanthropique au Québec! Rapport du Groupe de travail sur la philanthropie culturelle* (Bourgie Report) (Québec, 2013); and Ministère de la Culture et des communications du Québec, Comité d'orientation sur l'investissement dans la culture, *Pourvoir la culture ensemble: cahier de propositions* (Québec, 2005).
4. See Bourgie Report, *Vivement, pour une culture philanthropique au Québec!* (Québec, 2013), and Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal, *La culture à Montréal. Chiffres, tendances et pratiques innovantes* (Montreal, 2015)
5. We are witnessing a wave of international initiatives seeking to contest museums' sources of funding, especially funding derived from the oil industry against the backdrop of climate change. See, for example, the activities of The Natural History Museum (<http://thenaturalhistorymuseum.org/>), the Art Not Oil Coalition (<http://www.artnotoil.org.uk/>) and Platform London (<http://platformlondon.org/>).
6. Pierre Lassonde is a businessman who made his fortunes from the mining industry. He is the president of and a donor to the Musée national de beaux-arts du Québec, whose recently completed pavilion has been baptized in his name. As president of the Canada Council for the Arts he succeeds Joseph L. Rotman, who also owes his prosperity to the extraction industries, oil and gas in this case. Since its founding in 1957, the Canada Council has been headed by 20 presidents of which only 4 were artists.
7. Beyond the usual commemorative plaques, tributes, and media attention, private patrons have benefited in recent years from prizes intended to underline business' contribution to the arts. Examples include the annual Arts-Business Awards in Montréal, offered by the Conseil des arts de Montréal and the Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal, and the Prix Arts et Affaires offered by the Chambre de commerce et d'industrie de Québec.



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