

## **MANIFESTO FOR CULTURAL POLICY IN THE AGE OF DEMOCRACY**

**or**

### **The New Patrons Protocol**

Representative democracy is an extraordinarily audacious cultural project: to create a society of individuals who are free and equal before the law, while respecting their individuality and interests. However, in order to respond to the growing doubts about its ability to achieve this ambition, and to avoid authoritarian drifts and other deleterious effects that a feeling of powerlessness can induce, this representative democracy is bound to have to enrich and complexify its forms of exercise. And it is in culture that we can best imagine and implement a form of democracy that is also participatory, capable of building trust and helping to bring to maturity a form of government that is still very young by historical standards.

This is the aim of an international project governed by the New Patrons Protocol. It's an emblematic project that shows, in the field, how participation can become effective when a society frees itself from the age-old prejudice that, beyond the right to vote or give an opinion, the people have no right to act. And this despite the fact that it was in their name that a revolution was waged to give them the right to write their own history, rather than remain its spectators or victims.

A project that proves that an entire society can be involved and demanding in the construction of a culture that is not ethereal, but made up of a set of forms with tangible effects that we must create and transmit, because they are not innate: the forms of an individuality and a relationship with others, of a relationship with time and space, with the Earth and with living things. Such forms are based on experience of this world and an understanding of its ins and outs, such as the arts and sciences can offer.

### **Citizen control as a matter of course**

To build this culture, heritage enrichment and access to existing works and knowledge, as currently offered by public and private cultural policies, is no longer enough. The time has come to offer all citizens who wish to take responsibility the opportunity to initiate commissions of artists and scientists, whose work is shaping a civilization. This civilization must now master the complexity of the issues and expectations of a democracy, confront unprecedented ecological hazards and the risks of exponential technological development. We don't know the social and cultural consequences of such developments, but, whether fortunate or dramatic, humanity has never cast their achievement aside.

A project of this kind requires us to be able to make commissioning a routine, self-evident practice that reconnects with an age-old history, a history that has seen countless works born, live and die after they have played their part, and those that remain nourish a memory that is essential to us. This history's continuation is no longer being written under the aegis of religious, political or economic powers, but by an entire society that is now embracing creation and research to meet the needs it has itself recognized and expressed.

The experience of this project confirms that, within this society, the number of Patrons ready to commit themselves will be limited only by the means it decides to make available.

### **In culture, any person or community can become a remarkable actor**

However, no society can agree to invest as many resources as it needs in the development of such a policy without a shared recognition of the necessity to do so. And it was for the "doing" that it was proposed to launch this project, the implementation of which has revealed that anyone can become, in culture and contrary to received ideas, a remarkable actor of intelligence nourished by real-life situations, as well as courage and tenacity in action. This actor can assume, without prejudice, the risks of creation and research, as well as those of negotiation between the conceptions and convictions that each person is required to express in order to create a work in common, or during the public debates that a commission inevitably provokes. Such a commission reveals that no one needs to be a specialist in art history to recognize art's power of radical transformation, nor to be a scientist to appreciate the benefits of a solidly established understanding.

In this context, defining the purpose of a creation or research project is as great a responsibility as inventing its forms, and, in the context of shared responsibility, it is assumed by all social players: individuals from all walks of life and social functions, as well as legal entities such as companies and organizations, both public and private, whose activities and aims all have cultural dimensions that can be recognized and assumed with this commissioning protocol. If cultural policy is to rise to the challenge, it needs to be a shared concern, and not just a matter for specialist administrations.

### **The importance of a mediator-producer**

The implementation of this policy is carried out by a mediator who assumes a new key role as someone whose knowledge and skills enable to establish links between all the players involved, and to imagine ambitious projects. After providing information on this unprecedented opportunity for action and answering the questions it raises, this mediator is ready to listen to and serve anyone, alone or in association with others, who is ready to assume public responsibility for a commission.

The mediator initiates a process of critical reflection involving all stakeholders, whose collective action is organized in accordance with their respective requirements. Reflection on the nature of the subject, its relevance to a community, and its feasibility will lead, or not, to the drafting of specifications, or a research program, which will be finalized by the author(s) deemed appropriate and proposed to the Patrons. Preliminary studies or pre-projects are also evaluated, if necessary, to ensure that they are better suited to the shared ambition. When the decision is made to go ahead with a project, the mediator assumes the role of a producer, bringing together the resources needed to see it through to a successful conclusion. With the efficiency of private-sector management that does not discourage initiative, its procedures can and must take account of the production constraints specific to creation and research, as well as to the context of the commission.

Aware of the importance of time, the mediator assumes the role of a diplomat whose intervention is not remunerated by the stakeholders in order to preserve independence. This new operator's actions and responsibilities are part of the services offered to the public by the structures to which they are attached. Structures such as associations, art or research centers, museums, universities, theaters, etc., are all dedicated to establishing links between the arts, sciences and the public, and are financed to that end by local authorities and patrons who legitimize their contributions by enabling them to offer this new service.

But beyond an appeal to art and science, what's at stake here is being able to give a satisfactory form to democracy itself, to create and implement a form of its exercise that responds to the essential need to be heard, to be believed, to be able to exercise a right such as that of deciding what deserves to be done and the exacting criteria to be met.

### **A historic paradigm shift: a shared cultural policy**

It is the support of major European patrons and public partners that has enabled these mediators to test the relevance of the New Patrons Protocol, and now propose it as a model. Over the course of more than a quarter-century, these Patrons and partners have provided the resources for a field experiment that has cost over one hundred million euros and involved thousands of clients from all walks of life and work in Europe and other parts of the world, to whom hundreds of renowned artists and researchers in all disciplines - from architecture to music, from the visual arts to theater and dance, from philosophy to the social, economic and natural sciences - have responded with remarkable works.<sup>1</sup>

The quality and originality of these works show how much creativity and research can benefit from being able to draw on all the issues of the day, whatever their complexity, nature or diversity. Such achievements show just how much artists and researchers can themselves benefit from participation in projects that take them out of conventional frameworks and give their work a purpose that helps people.

Now that the experiment has been a success, we need to scale up the implementation of this Protocol, which governs the initiative of individuals acting in the public interest on their own behalf to the level of a major public policy. As such, the sponsors who can bring the means of an economy to this development are the first to be concerned. These are the personalities, families and companies who, over and above the traditional form of support for specific projects, are reviving a historic tradition of backing vanguard initiatives. By contributing resources that are the fruit of their own entrepreneurial capacity, they choose to show solidarity by offering their society the means to take the initiative as well, and offer artists and scientists new outlets to produce works and studies that become the property of a community with a value that is no longer marketable but of use.

To act in a field where the data to be taken into account is particularly sensitive and difficult to formulate, elected representatives and heads of administrations who must be at the service of all, cannot give priority to a particular approach and provide assistance that is not standardized. However, in collaboration with independent mediators who can provide a

listening ear and assistance adapted to the originality of the project, they can invest the resources entrusted to them with a better knowledge of the facts and within the framework of a sustainable economy. In fact, while commissions initiate a cultural development dynamic in any location that calls for investment, this can be measured according to the context, and entail little or no recurring operating costs that most local authorities cannot afford. On the other hand, recognizing the authority of a citizen exercising his or her cultural right to act in no way diminishes the importance of the driving role they themselves can play in the development of civic initiative and its successful inclusion in public space and life. Nor does it, in any way, diminish their own capacity to become a stakeholder patron within a group whose actions are governed by this protocol.

As holders of the means to achieve this, these sponsors and elected representatives are called upon to play a decisive role in an historically unprecedented project. They can now count on the commitment of an ever-growing number of mediators who have equipped themselves with tried and tested tools and methods to manage the resources allocated as closely as possible to the needs. They have also joined forces<sup>2</sup> to provide appropriate responses to requests for interventions, evaluations and experience sharing, and to develop their capacity to act as part of a regional, national or international network.<sup>3</sup>

The commitment of these mediators-producers, who give so many citizens the desire to get involved and act, is as essential to the possibility of a participatory democracy as that of elected representatives in a representative democracy, and that of sponsors in realizing a shared ambition. It is from this commitment that a civilization can emerge in which culture assumes the major political role it should, and which fully legitimizes the investments it requires. A History in which the safeguards are no longer simply a separation of powers, but a sharing of responsibilities that builds a democracy that is no longer perceived as a problem, but as a work in progress.

François Hers, March 2025

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<sup>1</sup> Examples are presented on various social networks and on the websites of the associations or structures to which the mediators are attached.

<sup>2</sup> Information on these associations and their network can be requested from :  
International Society of the New Patrons / 399 - 32 avenue Louise, Brussels 1050 -  
Phone + 322 450 92 15 / [internationalsociety@newpatrons.be](mailto:internationalsociety@newpatrons.be)

<sup>3</sup> A network under construction which, for example, can offer a European Union the means to develop the cultural policy it still lacks to build itself, by people's initiatives throughout its territory, while respecting their differences and the principle of subsidiarity vis-à-vis its member states.