

*Reclaiming Public Culture as  
a Common Terrain of Action in the Public Interest*

*A Dialogue with Raluca Iacob*

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*2014-2024 (together with Vera Marin and commissioned by the Municipality of Timișoara) and, as councillor to the minister of culture in 2016, the design of the national strategy for culture and heritage. Other relevant collaborations with: the Center for Consultancy for European Cultural Programmes, the Romanian Academic Society, the Romanian Federation of Community Foundations and the European Network of Cultural Centres. Currently she is interested in practices and policies of culture in education, in alternative models of cultural governance and in cultural networks.*

**Livia Pancu:** I want to start by first saying a big thank you for accepting to give us this interview. Just to briefly mention that today we have to discuss a quite wide subject of which even I, who have been present in the realm of contemporary culture as a professional, do not have a very clear image yet. Thus, I would kindly ask you to first give us a sort of personal and professional trajectory of your own. Better said, a trajectory of your own work, that of a cultural worker, because I assume that this specific work built a very clear conceptual space for you, in which one could navigate.

**Raluca Iacob:** Thank you for the invitation. Indeed, I also believe that my professional path is a good lens to grasp the meaning of *public culture* as value-statement, and as experience-based, so not only a purely theoretical constructed concept.

I started to work in culture when I was 24 years old as a consultant for the Romanian Cultural Contact Point, now the Creative Europe Desk. My job was meant to facilitate, negotiate and transition ideas, opinions and data among the perspectives of the European Union, the one of the cultural actors, and other funders, local administration, or the Ministry of Culture. The result was to offer advice and information about how to obtain European funding for cultural cooperation projects. Because it was fundamental for my overview and for my professional path, I am going to insist a bit on this first job.

**Livia Pancu:** Please do, but before that I just wanted to pin point that all this was happening in Bucharest. Which year?

**Raluca Iacob:** This was happening in Bucharest in 2007; it was a public institution that was called The Center for Consultancy for European Culture

Programmes, placed under the Ministry of Culture. Me and my colleagues often travelled around the country for workshops and presentations, so I got to know a diversity of places and organizations. There I learned first-hand how the European Union engages with culture as a domain and with the cultural actors, and I understood how the European institutional space of ideas was structured, a space in which diversity, cooperation and respect for human rights were valued. This is how I grew an appreciation for and a practical understanding of partnerships and the value of intercultural dialogue and competences, an encompassing view of the public value of culture and an inclusive definition of who its main players are. I had the chance to reflect on key topics of cultural policy, but also to meet international specialists in the field, who later influenced my work, such as Dragan Klaić, who coordinated my MA thesis at Central European University on the subject of advocacy for culture in transition countries, with a focus on the Romanian situation after 1989. In my view, this first job I had for almost three years was fundamental for everything I have done afterwards, because it made me understand how different viewpoints converge or disband, how power structures can interact and how important it is to create a safe and consistent space for exchange and mutual respectful contribution of all.

Because I was on the lookout to spot the most pressing needs of the Romanian cultural actors that I could provide a solution to, I was inclined to do more than my job-description implied; for example, to get informed and to think about other types of services that the cultural actors would require. Therefore, I quit and I started a free service of informing cultural actors about funding opportunities. Further on, I went to study cultural policies at Central European University, meanwhile co-founding with other cultural actors the *Coalition of the Independent Cultural Sector*. And from 2011 onwards, I started to do what I am continuing to do nowadays: work simultaneously on several projects or assignments, as an independent researcher, as a consultant, as a manager, as a project evaluator, as a trainer with NGOs, public institutions, public administrations, local, national and European. In 2012 I co-founded an NGO called *MetruCub – Resurse pentru Cultură* [CubicMeter – Resources for Culture] with Bianca Floarea and Ioana Tamaş.

**Livia Pancu:** Just another quick question: have you also worked in public administration as part of the cultural domain, as an employee?

**Raluca Iacob:** Yes. I was a counsellor of the Minister of Culture, Ms. Corina Şuteu, from May 2016 to January 2017, in charge of redrafting the *National Strategy for Culture and National Heritage* as well as coordinating the Platform for Living Culture, among other things. And the first job I had, the one I already mentioned, was within a public institution that was part of the administration, in direct contact with the Ministry.

**Livia Pancu:** If we were to look at what you have described so far as to a kind of a grid, where you have two coordinates: one is the temporal line that starts with 2007, the year when Romania joined the EU, up to now, and the other one follows the independent scene, public administrations – both in the EU and nationally – can you describe to us whether there is a progress or not in the way publicness is understood? Also, you mentioned earlier that part of your most important values are diversity and cooperation, but you also addressed vulnerability. How do you think this concept changed from 2007 to the present day in those three different registers mentioned above?

**Raluca Iacob:** I think in 2007, compared to the present moment, there was more eagerness among the Romanian public administration, especially the Ministry of Culture, to reflect and discuss openly those democratic values and principles of participative governance, the public value of culture, the role of partnerships and cooperation, the role of NGOs for an inclusive concept of public culture, and really try to integrate them in new legislation, policies, programmes, discourses of the institutions and the officials. Also, at that time, the European Union's actions and discourse on culture were much more directed towards access to culture, intercultural dialogue, diversity of cultural expressions, and so on. There was this encompassing political view that was much more socially-oriented, much more looking at people and communities, at the complexity of the cultural ecosystem in a connective way, at the relation between the arts or heritage, on the one hand, and the way people are making sense of them, their values, their cultural rights, on the other.

Still, already by 2007 one could notice, from the European Union level to the national and local one, a trend of measuring the economic impact of culture, the value of culture in terms of the money it generates in the economy, and a shift in the political discourse leaning in this direction. That was the time when the referential KEA study was done.<sup>2</sup> This strong trend has been counterbalanced again in the past few years with a much needed orientation of discourse towards the relation between culture and sustainable development, audience engagement and cultural participation, well-being, and partnerships as a model of international cultural relationships. It is again a turn towards the value of a democratic cultural practice in society, but the world is not the same as in the 2000s, and the focus on cultural and creative industries and the routine of valuing culture in terms of its economic capacities left its strong mark.

The influence of a financial outcome-based reasoning to support culture presents many challenges (and few opportunities) for public culture, especially in difficult economic and social situations, such as the ones generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, for example. In these scenarios, where there is a need for targeted and strong state support for key types of cultural actors working in the public interest, the focus on the financial value of their work as an argument for their worth is wrong, in my opinion, and it is a result of the line of thinking that frames the economic impact of culture as a measure of its societal value.

The Romanian public administration's discourse used to be quite mimetic to the main European trends, but its practice has and continues to have a quite strong conservative core. The legislative reforms from the late 90s and early 2000s were inspired by examples from other European countries, where our cultural policy shapers worked or studied, and because there was at some point consistent funding for reform and capacity building within the administration, as we were in the process to be accepted as EU members and needed to consolidate our capacity to act based on democratic principles and a new view of how cultural management should behave. But that was back

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<sup>2</sup> KEA European Affairs, *The Economy of Culture in Europe*. Study prepared for the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education and Culture), October 2006.

then, and the most recent important national cultural norm is from 2008. Since, we were only left with the mimeticism of discourse, and a very conservative and inertial policy practice took the lead, which meant neglect and inactivity mostly.

Thus, the talk about the economic contribution or value of the cultural and creative industries was adopted very rapidly – albeit with no practical or policy follow-up – while the paradigm of access to culture and participation was to a great extent left behind. This happened even though Romania did not really resolve the issues of the lack of availability of cultural infrastructure and did not address the need to provide a supportive frame of work and funding of cultural NGOs and a status of the creator, nor did it persevere to build an inclusive concept for the public value of culture but was complacent and stayed with the model of understanding public culture meaning only the work of public cultural institutions.

**Livia Pancu:** Can we say that this concept of public culture was better addressed in the – let us say – older paradigm than in the new one, where you have industry and entrepreneurial mindset, so on and so forth? Should we first start defining the concept of public culture?

**Raluca Iacob:** One must say from the beginning that academia more often refers to the *public value of culture* or *culture in the public interest*, than to *public culture*. Still, at least in our Romanian case, and maybe in all spaces that share our political, cultural and institutional dynamics, I would argue it makes most sense to refer to it as such. I will come back to this later on.

*Public culture* as a term is mentioned by my late professor of cultural policies, a key European expert, who has influenced not only the development of a European space of thinking about policies of culture, but also managed to propose valuable patterns of critical thinking that bridged the Western and Eastern experiences of cultural management and governance. I am referring to Dr. Dragan Klaić. He speaks about *public culture* as an opposite of commercial culture, when referring to the fact that “a large part of culture has intrinsic value without being able to make money; and this is why it has to be subsidized.

It is about a public interest that demands public investment, and not only for the sake of national representation but as a distinctive segment of the expressive culture and as a critical culture in itself.”<sup>3</sup>

In valuing the role of culture to society, which is in fact the perspective of public policies with a cultural dimension, this quote refers to the debate between those speaking about the intrinsic value of culture, versus supporters of its instrumental worth. But, here I feel the need to make a comment. Because we are talking about words and their power, the “intrinsic value of culture” is, to me, a tricky formulation, because it connotes this image of looking within, of a type of culture which is self-referential and in a way closed within itself for nourishment and justification, in isolation from the rest of society. In contrast, the way Dragan Klaic refers to *public culture* in the short quote above is more aptly expressed, it connects culture to society, via the idea of the *public interest of public culture*.

Even if in culture this discourse is only marginally prevalent nowadays – and in Romania it never was, I dare say – it is quite well established in the academia and the work of policy analysts, as a discussion about public goods, governance and the role of management in public institutions and the administration, the role of public funding and the ecosystem around public services in general. A good introduction of all these themes and the idea of *the public value of culture* is the literature review prepared by John Holden and Jordi Baltà in January 2012 (European Expert Network on Culture Paper)<sup>4</sup>.

Now, to come back to the term *public culture*. Last year, in a conversation about Romanian cultural strategies, the director of the Romanian National Institute for Research and Training, Dr. Carmen Croitoru, said the following: “Wrongly and in an absolutely artificial way, the public culture is fighting the private culture, as if they were sharing the same terrain, which is a big mistake, because we do not share the same terrain. We, the public culture, are constrained to follow some rules, and yes, private culture does not have

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<sup>3</sup> Dragan Klaic, “Culture shapes the contemporary city,” *Eurozine*, 22 June, 2010, <https://www.eurozine.com/culture-shapes-the-contemporary-city/>

<sup>4</sup> Baltà, Jordi, Holden, John. *The Public Value of Culture: a literature review*, European Expert Network on Culture Paper, January 2012.

the funds, but has a freedom that we will never have. On the other hand, we have a common goal, and we should be united.”<sup>5</sup>

I do not agree with the first part of the quote, though I stand behind the idea that we have a common goal. In fact, I would argue that it is precisely because public and private actors – in some conditions – have a common goal, that it means that they do share the same terrain. Not legally, and not in terms of legal constraints deriving from their legal form, but in terms of goals and objectives, which are *in the public interest*.

In my view, it is the *public interest*, and not the legal form, which shapes the terrain on which all the different actors that belong to the cultural ecosystem exist and interact. And for this reason, I suggest that a common denominator for this terrain should be found. I prefer to follow Klaić’s lead and refer to it as *public culture*, meaning a type of culture which by ambition is directed towards the public interest, and is diverse and inclusive in the legal form of its potential actors (public, private non-profit, freelance, independent, even commercial, depending on the situation). This term shakes the identification to which Ms Croitoru refers to, by which public culture fully overlaps with the work of public cultural institutions. I think we need to overturn the use of the term towards the idea that public culture is culture in the public interest, irrespective of the legal form of its actors. I don’t think that without such a strong shout-out there are any chances of change of perspective.

**Livia Pancu:** But aren’t these limits systemic? Aren’t these structural delimitations?

**Raluca Iacob:** It is structural only if we assume that the legal constraints of a certain type of legal form of an actor completely define the type of value they bring to society. But what I have lately noticed – not only me, but I can also call for John Holden’s ideas on cultures as ecosystems<sup>6</sup> – is that the roles and

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<sup>5</sup> Carmen Croitoru. Public intervention as speaker in the online conference (in Romanian), *Strategia culturală și new media art în România*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.far.community/talks/talk.php?id=6131cf6d35393048db00012d>.

<sup>6</sup> John Holden, *The Ecology of Culture. A Report commissioned by the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Cultural Value Project*, January 2015.



functions of the existing actors are dynamic, interactive and complex. His view is that the ecology of culture refers to “the complex interdependencies that shape the demand for and production of arts and cultural offerings.” It speaks about the relations among cultural actors and with the audience as making together the space of culture, and that these relations determine the particular (sometimes, changing or multiple) roles the actors take over time and in different situations.

That is why I think that the old way of understanding structure as being derived from the legal form does not tell you as much nowadays as it used to do. This is because one cannot just assume that the type of operational dynamic, the impact and the role can be determined fully from the legal form of an actor. The emergence of social businesses, the intersectoral actions, and the entrepreneurial turn (or push) in the work of cultural workers, public institutions and NGOs alike, are distorting the boundaries among types of cultural actors by legal form. One example. So many museums have associations of the friends of the museums. And in the work of the museum or public theatres, in terms of assessing the public value of their work, oftentimes even the managers report the shared impact they have in conjunction with the association of the friends of the museum, or via the partnerships they engage with other NGOs. How do you address this type of complexity if you do not have a proper conceptual terrain? That’s why I think we need to start a discussion about culture with a public interest, with a public value, which I suggest we call public culture, precisely because it provokes a change of understanding from its current use, where it only refers to the work of public cultural institutions.

The concept of *public culture* opens up the potential to shape collaborations around *common centers of interest* based on public interest related values among diverse players. The moment when you find common ground between that of your own work and that of another, regardless of the legal form, it seems to me to be a great win. From that point on, aspects like: legal form, artistic forms, dimensions of funding, the issue of where the funding is coming from, should be discussed, but within this sphere of what we would call public culture, as a culture which works in a direct relation to the public interest, and thus has a public value. I think that the fragmentation between independent culture, the one produced by public institutions, freelance and

industry has its limits in the way we understand what the impact or the effect of cultural practices and institutions in society is, and that the lenses of the public value of culture can open up fruitful pathways of critical and practical thinking and policy shaping. A huge potential from the perspective of shared, potential impact.

**Livia Pancu:** It is a forced conclusion, but I want to make sure that this is what you say. Is it that the entire spectrum of actors within the culture field should work more on a conceptual level and understand what society needs at this point, and collaborate on this, rather than within an entrepreneurial mindset whose first aim is to have profit, as opposed to an independent? Can this aim of the entrepreneurial mindset at some point, not at any point, turn something that is addressed to society into something else that is more useful for profit making and not for a non-profit targeted receiver? For example, I wonder how a social work directed NGO would find its meaning, if society would solve its inequality problems.

**Raluca Iacob:** I am not saying that cultural actors working in the realm of public culture should necessarily look and only address those issues which are coming from society. I think that the will and the freedom of the artist are really important. What I am saying is that the creation of a public value derived from cultural practices and the public interest guiding policies that engage or address cultural actors mean that those who enter this terrain should align their practices with these goals, and the policy makers should care for this. But public culture as a terrain meets the terrain of commercial culture and the same actor can be active in both. By legal form, by its typical constraints, each actor would find its own recipe to deal with the different pressures that are applied, for example to be entrepreneurial and mix and match commercial and public value actions.

For sure, this is not a safe interplay, and more likely in practice it looks like a continuous struggle and negotiation or even compromise. It needs rules and it needs an overview, it needs competences and reflection. It needs discussions and choices. The risk is to see a complete privatization of a cultural public institution, because of this hybridization and coming together of public and private actors on the same terrain. For this reason, I think that

some essential cultural goods, services or institutions should be kept safe, be protected in a way, in order to preserve their quality of publicness, and potential partners or allies be carefully selected to act jointly in the public cultural arena.

**Livia Pancu:** What are the mechanisms by which to make each actor aware of the potential of this concept (public culture)?

**Raluca Iacob:** I think the first step we should all take is to think about the meaning of our work. Why? And what for? And based on what principles? Once we are clear about these, I believe that we will be able to communicate and to join people who have the same interests and values, and see how and if it is the realm of public culture or not. This process requires clarity and courage, first at the individual level, and then at the organizational level. It is about authenticity, which is not the same as truthfulness. Authenticity means that the explicit meaning of work that is being done is not a fabrication for the eyes and ears of an outside persona, like the grant giver, our peers or even the public, but it is a felt and lived truth of those who express it.

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