



**Opening remarks by HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands  
ECF Princess Margriet Award for Culture ceremony**

**Amsterdam, 2 October 2019**

Your Royal Highness,  
Excellencies,  
Dear Laureates,  
Dear friends,

**Democracy Needs Imagination** is this year's leitmotif for the independent jury to select the laureates of the Princes Margriet Award for Culture – Ahdaf Soueif and City of Women. It is also the underlying theme of our broader strategic approach at the European Cultural Foundation.

But what does it actually mean - **Democracy Needs Imagination**? Isn't democracy an undeniable, unshakable principle of our lives, our societies in Europe? What can imagination add? How do we learn to imagine? And what is the role of culture in this?

There are many ways to answer these fundamental questions. One is by analyzing the current state of democracy. Another is by unraveling the very notion of imagination and the role of culture. Let me share a few thoughts on the latter in the context of today's world.

## **Why do we need imagination?**

Leaders 65 years ago visualized a peaceful and stable Europe. But of course what they imagined the future to be wasn't there when they thought of it. From that imagination, they built democracies and a united Europe through more understanding and close collaboration within and between countries. And they brought citizens along on this journey based on the principle of solidarity.

But the world today – and our perception of Europe thereof - is very different. We're so used to living in peace that we can't imagine that there won't be peace, making us skeptical of voices warning us that polarisation could lead to war. And the whirlwind of technological, social, economic and environmental changes may feel so overwhelming that we find it hard to keep up, let alone imagine there are ways for positive change.

We are constantly being pressured to question the validity of the life we're living. For some, it's because of the constant feed of social media images of the seemingly perfect lives of others. For others, particularly young people, the magnitude of global issues such as climate change feeds anxieties. This sense of being overwhelmed makes us vulnerable to voices appealing to anger and nostalgia, to fears about the unknown, to putting one's own interest before the other, especially if we don't know 'the other'. Undermining the notion of solidarity makes democracy fragile. Being pressured to focus on the now and immediate self-interest, blocks us from imagining the united future leaders visualised 65 years ago.

## **From there, the question then is: how to set our imagination in motion?**

As you probably know, our brain functions in such a way that the parts involved in understanding the current world and events around us, are also the ones creating new mental images of that world. So what we imagine for the future, is largely shaped by what we see, hear and experience in the now. So the challenge is to push this thinking beyond that. How to kick start this complex process?

Feeling pressured, we are unlikely to find it. But how do we do this if we feel pressured all the time? Pressured by the lack of time for real connection; by the stress of making ends meet or by being constantly on, and online...

So focusing too hard on locating imagination actually inhibits our ability to kickstart the process of imagining.

### ***This brings me the role of culture as a driver for imagination.***

We can only create new images if we allow ourselves the space and time to drift into unknown mental territory, for our thoughts to flow naturally and be surprised by unexpected ideas and insights. That's precisely the power of culture and cultural expressions: to unlock this meandering mental process in our brain to see something else than the 'here and now' and what we hear and see every day. When it comes to Europe, we need drivers and spaces that help us imagine a future of peace and stability in Europe. Imagine the steps to take to achieve that. Imagine life with those who come from cultures other than our own.

Culture helps us imagine. Imagine a future that is positive and worthwhile living, realizing that we can only achieve this together.

### ***What does this mean for the European Cultural Foundation?***

For the past 65 years, ECF has been a firm advocate of a Europe grounded in culture. A Europe that exceeds the mere borders of the European Union. A Europe not solely as a monetary or political union but as a space that unites people through the values they treasure. ECF has supported those who, even in the most complex and difficult socio-political contexts, strive to express their own vision of Europe.

Our goal today is to help people imagine democracy in a contemporary way and to channel a narrative that explores what a renewed vision of Europe could look like. We are encouraged by the outcome of our dialogues with partners and grantees over the past year. You and many others gave us new insights on how to keep Europe alive by creating a sense of home, an open and curious unity, helping us to keep up with the fast pace we're living. What encouraged us most in all conversations is a great willingness of people from all walks of life to actively engage in democracy, a desire to make democracy fun and appealing beyond casting a vote through elections. The conversations also identified a real need for independent spaces where people can openly discuss complex societal issues with a view to find new solutions and positive ideas. Spaces that allow real dialogue without fear of labelling and politicizing. In short, independent spaces that kick start our mental processes of imagination.

That is precisely the role of artists and cultural change makers. They personify and create the space that pushes us to imagine new ideas and possibilities. They are well aware of the discomfort they create by challenging the status quo, to the point of being labelled naïve', 'irrelevant', 'political' or worse, extremist. But it's their independence of mind that drives them.

### ***The laureates***

The two laureates we celebrate tonight are outstanding cultural change-makers who engage in societal issues in their own artistic way, achieving an impact well beyond their cultural circles. Through your artistic work, you reconnect us with images of a collaborative Europe, one which is open and inclusive: a Europe that can help us overcome divides of all sorts. At a time when a united European is facing more and more skepticism, the role of culture of connect and imagine is more important than ever before.

Whatever your beliefs, I hope that tonight's celebration of culture frees up your own imagination, inspiring you to question your own convictions and gain space for new insights.

Thank you.