



EUROPEAN
CULTURAL
FOUNDATION

Princess Margriet Award

Fourth award

John Akomfrah & Charles Esche



Brussels, 19 March, 2012

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On the Day

Fittingly for an event dedicated to new possibilities for Europe, the fourth Princess Margriet Award was held in a Brussels venue called The Egg. Metaphors of hatching and incubation abounded, but, in truth, the word that best characterises the fourth Princess Margriet Award is 'radical'. In choosing two individuals whose work vigorously challenges the status quo, the Jury signalled the commitment of the Award to seeing Europe anew as a means of building it anew – a process of visionary transformation uniquely suited to the arts.



Left to right: HRH Princess Margriet of the Netherlands, Director Katherine Watson, laureate Charles Esche and laureate John Akomfrah.

Dedicated from the start to artists and thinkers who make change possible, the Award marked its fourth edition by honouring filmmaker John Akomfrah and curator Charles Esche.

A co-founder of the UK-based Black Audio Film Collective, Akomfrah has been

gaining plaudits for his innovative 'migrant cinema' ever since his startling debut, *Handsworth Songs* (1986). His work continually breaks new ground, unearthing hidden stories – or, at least, stories that are remote from the mainstream narratives of European history. In a recent film, *The Nine Muses* (2010), archival footage of black and Asian people in the UK forms part of an almost mythic vision of the migrant experience.

Esche has earned a reputation internationally as an outstanding curator who reveals how museums and other cultural institutions can be responsive to social change, engaging provocatively and productively with the contemporary world. Under Esche's directorship, Eindhoven's Van Abbemuseum has led the way in reframing such public spaces as centres of openness, hospitality and knowledge exchange: an experiment, certainly, but also in some respects a return to the ancient Greek idea of the *agora*.

The award ceremony, which took place in The Egg on March 19th, 2012, was notable for the premiere of *Peripeteia*, a short film by Akomfrah that was commissioned by ECF, and for Italian activist Franco Berardi's speech celebrating Esche's work. As much a performance as a speech, it tackled the theme of '[Art in the Age of Barbarisation](#)'.



Franco Berardi



Charles Esche, Judith Marquand, Franco Berardi and moderator Frénk van der Linden

Earlier in the day, Berardi and Esche were joined by Judith Marquand of Oxford University for a debate on the need to rebalance Europe's economic, cultural and political spheres. Their views were their own, but all three affirmed a central tenet of ECF's work: the need for investment in culture and the arts if we are to safeguard democracy in Europe.

What of the laureates themselves? Throughout their distinguished careers, Akomfrah and Esche have mixed aesthetics and radical politics. In his laudation, PMA jury member Jan Dibbets praised Akomfrah's whole film oeuvre for having cast an honest and loving eye on Europe's migrants. He also praised Esche for proving that culture is a living system of values that is forever changing as we enter into conversation with it.

The awards were personally presented by Princess Margriet of the Netherlands. As well as a sum of 25,000 euros each, the new laureates received awards created by the sound artist Nathalie Bruys. ECF's hope is that the award's message – which is that art has the power to create social change – will resonate across the European political and cultural landscape.



Left to right: Deputy Chair Rien van Gendt, Director Katherine Watson, laureate Charles Esche, HRH Princess Margriet of the Netherlands, laureate John Akomfrah, ECF President HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands.



Laudation

Read by Award Jury member, Jan Dibbets

"We honour John Akomfrah and Charles Esche, whose compelling work subverts the simplified image of our European past, valuing those experiences and expressions that are routinely overlooked. Akomfrah and Esche's work unlocks the radical potential of the archive. We see how the archive is an active medium for telling and retelling memories, for sharing them in a wider European – and, indeed, global – cultural space.

John Akomfrah is a pioneering, hugely influential filmmaker and cultural activist. With great dexterity, his work shows us how simplistic notions of difference – such as black versus white, centre versus periphery – have been historically fabricated. A



Award Jury member, Jan Dibbets

spokesperson for an under-represented culture, Akomfrah casts an honest and, at times, loving eye on the protagonists of European migration. His early, celebrated film, *Handsworth Songs*, made in collaboration with the Black Audio Film Collective, is both poetic and searing in its analysis of Imperialism, of the typecasting of the migrant in mainstream media and political discourse.

Akomfrah has gone on to produce a vital body of work that interweaves stories: of the migrants of Empire, of the Irish literary exiles Joyce and Beckett, of that preeminent wanderer of Western literature, Odysseus. At all points his work defies purist notions of cultural identity. Its focus is on the experience of becoming, the capacity to change: and this has meaning for us all.

Charles Esche has shown exceptional leadership in rethinking the museum as a public space. He has, so to speak, shaken the place up, reaching new audiences within and beyond the museum's walls through his challenging and exciting policies. For Esche the museum is a meeting ground between art and people. The approach of Esche and his curatorial team proves that culture is a living system of values that is forever changing as we enter into conversation with it.

The award goes to Esche for the work he has done throughout his professional life as a key independent curator and critical voice. Currently the Director of Eindhoven's Van Abbemuseum, Esche has enlivened cultural life in Glasgow, Malmö, and elsewhere. He has set up networks with many artists across the world. His exceptional work demonstrates the transformative potential of the cultural institution. And indeed he and his team have transformed our understanding of the museum. We see now clearly how it can be a site of hospitality, of genuine knowledge exchange; a place where we can be active players in a dynamic cultural environment.

The jury meeting in early September last year proved a hard day's work, and almost a hard day's night. Those nominated for cultural excellence were worthy candidates, but in our two laureates honoured here this evening we found the best examples of inspirational voices, inspirers of political imagination, and leaders of debate on the social realities of contemporary Europe. We salute their achievement and the legacy of their bold vision."

Memory is the Engine: John Akomfrah

'Yes, I am a diasporic figure,' says John Akomfrah, in a film-portrait especially made for the Award. 'But the ways in which we arrived in this place – by "we" I mean my family – were complicated and tragic and painful and violent. And I don't know anywhere else to go where I can find some answers.'

The journey his family made was from Accra, Ghana – Akomfrah's birthplace, and where his parents were anti-colonial activists – to London, England. And the place he goes to 'find some answers' is, he says, moving image culture. The youth who took his cinema seat before a screen showing movies by the likes of Tarkovsky, later banded together with friends from the local polytechnic to form the innovative Black Audio Film Collective. With his first feature film, *Handsworth Songs*, Akomfrah combined the aesthetic experimentalism and political engagement pioneered by the collective.



The Black Audio Film Collective (1982)

A 'film essay' made for the fledgling Channel 4 TV station in the UK, *Handsworth Songs* dealt with the mid-80s riots in an area of the English city, Birmingham, which was riven by racial tension, poverty, and disastrous police-community relations. Using archival material – a staple of Akomfrah's work – the film reached back beyond the turbulence of latter-day Handsworth to reveal the energy and optimism of the previous generation of migrants to the area.

Directed by Akomfrah and produced by the collective, *Handsworth Songs* pioneered the formulation of a new language for migrant cinema – a language that's grown in complexity as Akomfrah's work has developed. Why was this new language needed? Akomfrah explains: 'Most of the narratives that spoke about Britishness assumed, either explicitly or implicitly, that we were outside of those narratives. And, in fact, some of them work in almost violent opposition to the sense of our presence inside of those narratives. So the question of how one acquired a voice, both politically and increasingly culturally, became one of the obsessions both of myself and the collective.'



Still from the film *The Call of Mist* (1999) John Akomfrah



Still from the film *The Nine Muses* (2010) John Akomfrah

That voice was intent not merely on giving its side of the story – the story, or more properly stories, of an under-represented culture – but on showing how the whole notion of difference was, as the Award laudation says, ‘historically fabricated’. The concepts of ‘black’ and ‘white’ are much more than a matter of visual identification and skin pigmentation. ‘People had arrived at a sense of who was black by a sense of who was white,’ Akomfrah says. Crucially for its widespread appeal, Akomfrah’s work has explored this ‘dramaturgy of finding a voice’ in a way that relates to the migrant experience while conveying universal meaning. ‘What it is to be a migrant – the effort you make to fit into a culture, the effort you make to find a voice in the culture, the effort you make to find an identity in the culture – pretty much mimics what everybody else has to do anyway.’

Fitting in, and finding a voice and an identity, may be immediate challenges for us all, but that immediacy has a whole heap of history behind it. 'Memory,' according to Akomfrah, 'is the engine by which the souls of folk, not just black folk, acquire a value and an importance and a normality.' This emphasis on memory links Akomfrah to a previous PMA laureate, the Bosnian artist Šejla Kamerić, for whom memory's processing even of traumatic events brings 'a kind of happiness'. Likewise, while facing up to a grim colonial past, Akomfrah's approach possesses a kind of joy.

Nowhere is this joy more apparent, perhaps, than in Akomfrah's delight in sound – discordant sound, especially: that 'subversive presence' which undermines the plotted symmetry of narrative to announce, joyfully, that all is in a state of flux. For the PMA ceremony, Akomfrah joined forces with his long-time collaborator Trevor Mathison to create a commissioned 'electro-acoustic threnody', *At the Graveside of Andrei Tarkovsky*, in honour of that giant of modern cinema.



Still from the film *The Nine Muses* (2010) John Akomfrah



Still from the film *Peripetia* (2012) John Akomfrah

That enigmatic sonic opening and the visual impact of his short film, *Peripetia*, which was commissioned for the event, left the audience in no doubt that here was a considerable artist engaged in vital human issues in an affirmative – at times, playful – manner. The short film had a long frame of reference – from ancient mythology to the representation of ‘black subjects’ in the work of Hieronymus Bosch, Albrecht Dürer, and 19th-century colonial ethnographers. A portrait of longing, loss and human endurance movingly depicted by the ‘revived’ figures of Dürer’s Katherina (a black woman with a tight-fitting white bonnet) and an unnamed bearded black man, as they move through a wet European landscape. It is a matter of some pride for ECF that this piece which it commissioned has developed into a trilogy of new Akomfrah films – a straying from the original purpose that is apt in the context of Akomfrah’s politically responsive and responsible, but always suggestive and elusive work. He puts it best himself when he says: ‘When things are not anchored anymore to the original intent, the enigmatic arrives – with all its splendour and terror and magic.’

Waking Up in a Museum: Charles Esche

At the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Charles Esche wears two hats. Not literally, of course. He is the museum's director and he is also its curator. Such curator-directorship is increasingly rare in these days of the business-model museum. For Esche, the museum is far from being an unchallenging stop-off on an afternoon's outing. He received the ECF Princess Margriet Award precisely for the way he has changed our perception of what a museum is, and can potentially be; for revealing 'the transformative potential of the cultural institution'.

'It shouldn't be a place where you go to simply consume images, but to be woken up by the images,' he said in conversation with ECF. His own awakening occurred in the art galleries of Manchester when, as a card-carrying member of the British Labour Party, he was a young man immersed in politics. Becoming disillusioned with the 'pure managerialism' of the politics of the day – this was in the early 1980s – he was drawn to art and the fresh possibilities it seemed to offer. Politics has been described as 'the art of the possible', but Esche saw neo-liberal politics as 'speaking to impossibility'. As he explained, 'the idea that another world is possible was something that politics was no longer interested in.'

One effect of neo-liberal politics was that the very existence of public spaces came under threat. Esche is a champion not of the 'dead museum' but of the lively, difficult place of encounter where critical thinking is paramount. Especially in an age awash with unprocessed information, it is this ability to provoke and allow space for critical thinking which marks out the cultural institution as a modern agora.

Radicalism and experimentalism are the keywords of this agoric vision. Radicalism means, for Esche, 'turning the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top' – history rewritten, not this time by the wealthy and powerful. And experimentalism, insofar as it relates to cultural institutions, involves rooting them not in the past but in their relevance today. For this, curatorial experiments are needed – not just in terms of what is shown, but whom it is shown to and discussed with: new audiences rather than established ones. 'I don't think we're very good at confirming people's taste,' he remarks, as if modestly, before adding mischievously 'that's what other museums do.' His task, and that of his team, is to create 'an environment in which to put prejudices aside'.



Charles Esche

Esche was praised by the Award Jury for the work he has done throughout his professional life, notably in Eindhoven, Glasgow and Malmö. Early in his career he was the visual arts director of the international arts space Tramway in Glasgow, and from 2000 to 2004 he was director of Malmö's Rooseum Centre for Contemporary Art. His curatorial adventures include U3, the Slovenian Triennale in Ljubljana in 2010, and (as co-curator) the RIWAQ Biennial in Ramallah, Palestine, in 2007 and 2009, and the 9th Istanbul Biennial (2005). He is also co-founder and co-editor of the contemporary art-focused Afterall Books and the Afterall Journal.

Esche puts his wide experience of the archival to good use in presenting exhibitions, symposia and debates that resonate in the present rather than merely reek of the past. 'We can reach back into [the archives] and pull out a story,' he says, 'and each moment requires a different story in order to be meaningful.' This creation of new meaningful contexts for the archival is akin to the direction pursued by his fellow PMA laureate, filmmaker John Akomfrah. Like Akomfrah, Esche is interested in what he calls 'parallel narratives' that run alongside, and often oppose, the dominant narrative of the day.

This rebuke to powerful elites does not take the form of an embrace of the masses. Esche's approach may be democratic, but, as he points out, democracy is as much about protecting minority rights as expressing the will of the majority. 'The minority, which includes people who produce contemporary culture, is actually very important to cherish in society, and I believe that this minority can never join the mass, it always has to differentiate itself.'

Art's innate internationalism, its striving to communicate across all forms of border, mean that 'otherness is built into the very core of art'. Declaring himself pleased to be the recipient of an award that is non-national in nature, he also stresses the importance of looking beyond the European too. There is no doubting either his sincerity or the scale of his ambition: 'If we have a global economy,' he says, 'we also need to have a planetary democracy.'

What Will Work?

Pre-ceremony debate

The debate hinged on a question: 'Politics, economics and culture: a different balance?' Each of the three speakers hails from one of these three spheres, with some overlap. Charles Esche's cultural work as curator and museum director is infused with political urgency, as we have seen; Judith Marquand is an economist who argues for the artistry of that discipline; and Franco Berardi is a Marxist theorist who has launched or contributed to many cutting-edge media outlets.

Emerging Possibilities

Esche made the surprising admission that he is unsure if art and culture are the proper spheres in which to pursue his goals. This is because culture tends to have an effect over 30 to 50 years – too long a time-frame for the immediate results he would like to see.



Judith Marquand



The economic, cultural and political, he said, are society's three pillars. They represent three distinct value systems. One pillar, the economic, has become supra-dominant in recent years through neo-liberalism, a doctrine that imposes itself not as an ideological choice but as an inevitability: according to its devotees, there is no other option. What was merely a theoretical proposition 30-odd years ago has solidified into 'truth'.

Such a simplistic world-view cannot hope to capture our complexity. We must

rebalance our public discourse, ask real cultural and political questions such as 'What is democracy?' The super-complexity, super-diversity of our lives needs to be embraced – at local level, to be effective; and at planetary level, to be meaningful. New possibilities, which we cannot know beforehand, are not to be controlled from above, but to emerge from below.

Renewing Europe

Esche cited art historian TJ Clark's remark that 'modernity is our antiquity'. Museums house the relics, or ruins, of Modernism – and it is time that we started seeing them as such. Instead of being locked up in collections, they should be 'reused'. We need to set the resources free: a certain percentage loaned or sold or given away. This would free up some literal space, but also space inside our heads, enabling society to think itself anew. Museums, which already give access to the public sphere, are well placed to become platforms for collective thinking, and could act as meeting places for different kinds of knowledge.

This collective approach is in line with the way that art is developing. The emphasis on individualism in art is an outdated Modernist concept, and the actual practice of artists is increasingly collaborative.

If the EU had invested in cultural and educational platforms rather than the free market then we would have a different Europe today.

Alternatives to Orthodoxy

Judith Marquand proposed that we see economics as a form of art and not a deductive science. Like the artist, the economist selects his or her material – specific observations and assumptions – for the challenge at hand.

Unfortunately, the prevailing academic view of economics is that it is a game comprehensible only to the initiated. In contrast, the economist John Maynard Keynes was intensely practical, asking: 'What will work?' Those economists for whom mathematics rather than critical analysis is supreme are not really interested in the way the world works. They exhibit an ignorant worship of science, not realising that science proceeds by a set of hypotheses. This take-over of economics by the neo-liberals began in the 1960s, reaching its height in the 1980s as the ideas of Milton Friedman held sway. It is still very apparent today.

Like artists, economists need to debate their art with others; in their case, other economists, decision-makers, and the general public. The dumbing down and corruption of the press makes it difficult to have an informed public, but if the options are clearly explained, then people are perfectly capable of contributing constructively. They need to understand that there are always alternatives to the prevailing orthodoxy, and to learn how to praise them.

Over the last thirty years we have witnessed an erosion of the ideal of the public good. On a positive front, there has also been a groundswell of intelligent protest. We need to allow protesters the mechanisms to get their messages across.

Invest, Invest, Invest

If he were a politician, Franco Berardi said, he would try to understand democracy, and then he would insist, as Charles Esche had done, that the first thing we have to do is invest, invest, invest – in culture, education, and imagination.

The two basic conditions of democracy – producing, voluntarily, the conditions of freedom, and deciding your own destiny – are being undermined in the world today. Media freedom was destroyed in Italy in the 1970s as a large influx of wealth came into the equation. (Italy is, notoriously, the place where bad experiments start.)

When it is dogmatically affirmed that we have no choice, then democracy is dead,

an empty word. And when the democratically elected Prime Minister of Greece is forced to resign for seeking a referendum on the prospect of society being destroyed for the sake of the European Central Bank, then democracy has been destroyed in the very place that it was conceived.

Saving Democracy's Legacy

As the speakers took their seats alongside each other on stage, the talk turned to the 'serious danger' (as Marquand observed) of a new fascism emerging. The only way to save the legacy of democracy, they agreed, was to reinvent it. But was it already too late to do so? Berardi thought so, while Esche insisted that we had to believe otherwise, even if this was a delusion.

Despite the long wait for a return on investment in culture, this was the only thing that Esche knew could have an effect. And we have to accelerate that effect.

Berardi rebuked the idea that mainstream media could be changed for the better. Instead he puts his faith in the social movements that are bringing solidarity, helping people rediscover the pleasure of being together. Marquand sees some hope in the possibility of creating more publicly funded media outlets that retain their autonomy.

Overall, the speakers painted a bleak picture of an intellectual climate dominated by neo-liberalism, which is thwarting democracy by insisting on choicelessness while it ravages the economic wellbeing of the vast majority of the public. But the situation is not without hope. Looking five years ahead, Esche predicted that neo-liberalism's value system will no longer be accepted – a development that will create fear in the super-rich, but release energy in others.



Epilogue: Alternative Future

In the late spring of 1977, The Sex Pistols topped the UK charts with a song that warned of there being 'No future'. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, in whom the rebellious punk ethos is alive and well, quoted the song's words at the pre-ceremony event in The Egg. For the young people of Europe 'No future' has, Berardi said, changed from being a slogan of cultural defiance to a statement of fact.

It was as a remedy against such despair that the ECF Princess Margriet Award was originally conceived. That xenophobia and populism were threatening the European vision embodied by the EU became all too apparent towards the end of the last decade. The award was launched in 2008, the 'European Year of Intercultural Dialogue', with the express intent of highlighting the role that arts and culture could play in achieving a genuinely inclusive Europe. The first laureates were cultural theorist Stuart Hall and dancer-choreographers Jérôme Bel and Pichet Klunchun, choices which signalled the theoretical and practice-based aspects of that highlighted role.

Convincing the politicians and media that arts and culture were not peripheral to European renewal was never going to be easy, and would not be achieved by an award alone, but the point was to provide impetus to a growing confidence in the cultural sector that it deserved to be centre-stage in European affairs.

Esche's observation that culture needs time to have an impact was well made in the context of the PMA. As with ECF itself, the award keeps an eye on the longer term. Few in the field better epitomise the endurance required for the long haul than Borka Pavićević, laureate of the second PMA, who has devoted her career to keeping the lines of public discourse open in the former Yugoslavia, notably as Director of Belgrade's Centre for Cultural Decontamination. In her acceptance speech she said of diversity that it 'denies the uniformed man's demand for papers, regardless of his uniform. It is a creative challenge, the precondition, the First Principle of making art.... It's all about defiance.'

One common focus among all three speakers in The Egg was defiance of the prevailing neoliberal orthodoxy and its insistence on there being 'no alternative' (= 'no future?'). One ray of hope is the challenge to orthodoxy presented by the Occupy movement, which exemplifies the kind of civil energy required to overcome a petrified value system that impoverishes millions. The hope is that

such defiance will lead to a rebalancing of politics, economics and culture – where neoliberal economics no longer constantly trumps the other two.

Stirring stuff. But the PMA repeatedly brings us back to the practical realities of lives as they are lived now, imperfectly, and the meaning that is to be found therein. Thus, prior to the 2012 award, three very different artists were recognised for their documentary and imaginative uncovering of the truth of daily lives: Stefan Kaegi, a theatre-maker whose ‘performers’ are real people – such as those daily (and nightly) border crossers, truck drivers; Šejla Kamerić, a survivor of the siege of Sarajevo, whose films and other visual work show how the survival of trauma is recorded and aided by memory; and Kutluğ Ataman, who has revealed to us, innovatively, the lives of shanty dwellers near Istanbul and the ‘paradise dwellers’ of southern California, among others.

Innovative documenting of the real and an imaginative drawing on memory, on ‘the archive’: these strands combine with great artistic effect in the work of John Akomfrah, laureate of this fourth Princess Margriet Award, further amplifying the award’s artistic and social relevance.

‘The new dark age has to be faced,’ warned Berardi. Four award ceremonies and nine laureates on, we can do so more confidently in such gifted and compelling company.



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Princess Margriet Award

The European Cultural Foundation believes that culture connects people as Europeans and helps to build a shared future. We initiate and support cultural exchange and creative expression across wider Europe. We do this because culture inspires, empowers and engages people to create democratic societies. We achieve our aims through our wide-ranging activities, advocacy, grants and co-publish and create new content both online and offline, building tools for the cultural sector.

The Award is presented by ECF's former President, HRH Princess Margriet of the Netherlands, in whose honour it was established, by the ECF, with the support of the Dutch Ministries for Foreign Affairs and Education, Culture and Science. The annual prize money is € 50,000.

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