
For a Revitalisation of Governance in Arts Associations

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Arts associations have never won fame for the quality of their governance. The French legal form of the “association” (under the 1901 Law) is often a default tool which is only of use for managing projects and organising the relationships with public and private funders. Yet, other opportunities have developed and a new generation of project leaders has emerged.

Les Têtes de l'Art, an artistic mediation association created in 1996, has specialised in the production of and guidance for participatory artistic projects, in networking cultural actors on the territory, in pooling practices and skills and sharing resources. Along the years, after a growth crisis and a training period with Jean-François Draperi¹, the association has radically changed its functioning methods and gone for a participatory governance very far removed from the uses in the cultural sector.

Participatory governance is not a purely formal approach.

The first step was to reshape our statutes and move on from a complacent Board of Directors to a skilled, engaged one. But the real revitalisation of our governance has spread over several years. It lay its foundations on a vision of participation based on 5 key concepts. Indeed, participation cannot be imposed by decree, it must be built. It is not superficial, does not meet a fashionable trend and cannot be easily reversed, once it has been implemented. The first point I wish to make is about **transparency**, which is essential for fostering both the confidence and the wish to participate. The second point is about **sharing**, by creating meeting spaces (physical or digital) where the stakeholders can “make community”. The third point is about the **co-construction** of collective projects which are devised and debated upon together. The fourth point deals with **decision making** – participation only makes sense if it enables participants to influence the decision making process they are involved in. Lastly, the fifth point I wish to make is about **qualification**, ie. providing for time to make it possible for each of us to be trained, learn and progress in our skills and knowledge. With all these active principles thought of together, we have breathed active participation into our organisation’s members with tangible and measurable outcomes.

Is participatory governance a tool for cultural democratisation?

Today, we are convinced that the deep reforms undertaken in our governance methods has played a critical part in our development. We have not only gained recognition from our institutions and our partners, this recognition is also and above all one coming from the members of our association and the people living in our territory. Let us dream: what if the keys to cultural democratisation did not only depend on low supply pricing policies or other tools devised by cultural professionals, but also on new ways of rethinking the governance of our associations which would open them to the actors from our territories? It seems urgent to reflect upon it...

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