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# CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

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*Culture played its part in the Cold War, but in the 21st century a new kind of cultural diplomacy is required. András Szántó of the Sotheby's Institute of Art in New York tells Brunswick Arts that philanthropists and corporate sponsors could make it happen*

*Brunswick Arts works with many of the leading organizations and artists who practice cultural exchange around the world*



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1. The New York Philharmonic Orchestra in North Korea in 2008, the largest contingent of US citizens to visit the country since the Korean War. Music Director Lorin Maazel, in the camel-colored coat, drew a parallel with the orchestra's visit to the Soviet Union in 1959. Photograph: Chris Lee

**Probably one of cultural diplomacy's greatest achievements was the loosening up of countries in Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War. It was in those years that the United States most intensively used culture as a way of competing with its ideological adversaries. Art made it possible to showcase the values of freedom, openness and political progressivism as an alternative to the oppressive totalitarian arrangements in the Soviet bloc. And it worked.**

I grew up in Budapest in the 1970s and 1980s, and remember being significantly won over by the US and Western culture. Seeing American movies and abstract paintings, listening to jazz and rock 'n' roll, reading Allen Ginsberg or Norman Mailer, was a big deal for us – a lifeline to the West. I later discovered that the fact that we were exposed to the work of abstract expressionist painters, or to certain movies and popular music, was not entirely due to coincidence. Through the investments of the US Information Agency (USIA), among other US government bodies, a variety of cultural programs were aimed specifically at people like me. For those who braved the walk past the surveillance cameras, the library of the US Embassy – in downtown Budapest and stocked with magazines and books – was a refuge. It was there in 1988 that I took my GRE exams, which qualify you for graduate school in the US, and landed a scholarship in New York.

The deployment of cultural diplomacy was a means of sending signals and building good will, which, in turn, helped to ensure that when that region began to open up economically and politically it gravitated quite naturally towards the West. To be sure, Central and Eastern Europe had a pre-existing affinity with western European and, by extension, American culture. Still, I am quite certain that, in some describable measure, our natural inclination to turn westward in those pivotal years had been stoked by our immersion in the creativity and artistic ferment that, we believed, represented the very essence of freedom and democracy.

For American cultural diplomacy, however, that high point turned out to be a swan song. The USIA, established by President Eisenhower in 1953, still received about \$1.4bn annually

as late as 1994, some time after the Berlin Wall fell. But triumphalism and cost cutting quickly put an end to that. By 1996, its main cultural exchange division, Arts America, was eliminated. In 1999 the USIA was dismantled and its functions were dispersed across a range of agencies. The United States clearly felt that there was no longer an ideological competition that it had to win. The “end of history” was upon us, to use Francis Fukuyama's phrase for the idea that, once the Cold War was over, the era of ideological debate was done, and the Western liberal democracy ideology had won. There was no need to win over hearts and minds anymore.

### **Cultural diplomacy today**

Or so the thinking went. Events in 2001, however, made it clear that rather than having reached history's end, we had entered a state of transition. We were just switching gears.

Three key realizations have since emerged. First, there are indeed large parts of the world that need to be engaged – or re-engaged – through “soft” means, and failure to do so carries more risks of disruption and conflict. Second, cultural diplomacy today is being practiced in a much more complex world with more complex politics. We are no longer in the middle of a superpower competition between two clearly opposite sides, but in a multi-polar world with more and different voices competing for attention and legitimacy. In such a world, we no longer know exactly what it means to use culture as a means of building stable and vital relationships. Third, new technologies have become an important “interface” for people worldwide, with the internet making it possible for cultural exchanges to occur without artists or objects necessarily crossing borders.

The traditional tool kit of cultural exchange is, in short, being put to a test. We find ourselves in a moment of great opportunity, but also considerable confusion, about practicing and defining cultural diplomacy.

### **Soft power**

Cultural diplomacy signifies creative engagement between countries or societies and, more specifically, the ways in which

2. Jazz musician Dave Brubeck toured the Soviet Union, Poland, Iran, and Iraq with his quartet in 1958. In 2008 the US State Department honored Brubeck as the first individual recipient of the Benjamin Franklin Award for Public Diplomacy. Photograph: Getty Images



governments can use culture as a way of building bridges.

We can break this practice down into two dimensions. One is cultural diplomacy in the strictest sense, meaning the use of arts and culture as a tool of statecraft, specifically deploying cultural exchanges, artists, and art institutions to advance a nation's political agenda on the world stage. The second dimension encompasses a wider array of cultural relationships, not necessarily under the direct control of government agencies, but constantly happening between cultural institutions, which, in turn, can be promoted or supported in various ways by states.

The idea that nations can get their way in the world not just with the use of armies or economic might underlies another term commonly heard today, “soft power.” Joseph Nye, the Harvard Kennedy School Professor who coined the expression, defines the term as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.” Educational exchanges, world expositions and sporting events are all means of generating such attraction, along with culture, “high” and popular. Nowadays, many ascendant world regions – including countries in the Middle East, Asia, Central and South America – are also seeking to advance themselves this way. And they are willing to invest heavily to do so.

Museums and cultural facilities are proliferating in the Gulf, notably in Abu Dhabi, Qatar and, to a lesser extent these days, Dubai. Such initiatives signal something about the 

3. Saadiyat Cultural District in Abu Dhabi will be home to five major cultural institutions in buildings designed by leading international architects. Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, designed by Frank Gehry, is due to be completed in 2014.

Photograph: Tourist Development & Investment Company, Abu Dhabi



intentions of these nations. The creation of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, the Zayed National Museum and the Louvre Abu Dhabi – new institutions on Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Island – in addition to being tourist destinations and part of a wide-ranging economic and urban development strategy, sends messages to partners and allies alike about the aspirations of that nation.

### Europe and the US

Some countries take cultural diplomacy seriously, others less so. European nations that were once imperial powers have built up considerable cultural diplomacy apparatuses. A great deal of public administration expertise resides in the French system, for example, which includes a sprawling international network of institutes intended to project the influence of French culture and the French language worldwide. Germany is extremely active through its Goethe Institute, which often

seeks to become an active hub of the cultural life of the cities in which it operates. Much the same is true of British Council outposts around the world.

The Netherlands’ approach is somewhat different. Being a small nation, it is less concerned with “selling” Dutch culture through festivals and programs, and more actively involved in creating relationships between experts and institutions. The Dutch approach is predicated on the belief that when meaningful ties are established among artists and cultural decision makers, an ongoing exchange will naturally follow.

However, as Europe confronts its current fiscal crisis, this soft power infrastructure may soon end up on the chopping block. Policymakers in the Netherlands and elsewhere are increasingly looking across the Atlantic for alternative funding models. But it’s unlikely that they

will find there an effective substitute for government-based cultural diplomacy.

The US relies heavily on the private sector and on public-private partnerships, as it does in all aspects of cultural policy, especially since the dismantling of the USIA. Recently, there have been some encouraging signs that cultural diplomacy is making a comeback, after years of focus on “hard” power and overt propaganda. There is more rhetorical support for soft power at high government levels. Officers in charge of educational and cultural exchanges are working up new initiatives. Nevertheless, this area remains transitional and uneven, and budgets remain meager by comparison with the past, or with other countries (the State Department’s cultural exchange budget is approximately \$10m). And the most vexing practical challenge is that state support is not adequately counterbalanced with resources from private foundations.

4. Akram Khan and Juliette Binoche performing the dance theater piece, *in-i*, with stage design by Anish Kapoor. Part of Franco-British festival *Paris Calling*, the work was co-produced with theaters in London, Paris, Sydney, Rome, Luxembourg, Brussels, with Fondation d'entreprise Hermès.

Photograph: Marianne Rosenstiehl

In the American model, cultural funding is overwhelmingly outsourced to private organizations and incentivized through tax benefits. But international exchange is a low priority for most US foundations. A recent report from the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation found that funding cultural exchange programs constituted just one tenth of a per cent of American philanthropic activity.

### The Chinese dimension

In Beijing, by contrast, I have recently observed what might be called a quintessential example of cultural diplomacy, in this case, between China and Germany. China is currently building a hundred museums a year. It has just opened the world's largest museum, the redeveloped National Museum of China, on Tiananmen Square, directly opposite the Great Hall of the People and in the shadow of the Forbidden City.

There could be no more symbolic site for the institution, which is where China tells its story to the world. The National Museum is currently hosting its first major international exhibition and the event is being co-organized with three museum systems in Germany, encompassing 37 collections, which are loaning almost 600 works. The exhibition is about the European Enlightenment – a choice of topic that has raised eyebrows within and outside China.

Not only is the German Foreign Ministry providing more than €6.5m (\$9.3m) to directly sponsor the project, but the architects of the expanded museum are German, the Goethe Institute of Germany is providing educational programs, the Stiftung Mercator, a private German foundation, is hosting a series of expert salons and car manufacturer BMW is the corporate sponsor. All this is happening under the auspices of the heads of state of China and Germany, with signing ceremonies having taken place in the German Chancellery and Beijing's Great Hall of the People. The German Foreign Minister attended the opening and the exhibition was even included in a diplomatic communiqué on strategic collaboration between the two countries.

Although the festivities were somewhat clouded by tensions, following a clampdown on free expression by Chinese authorities concerned with unrest in the Middle East, the original 🌊➔



Sophie Claudel  
French Cultural Attaché to the US

### Cultural diplomacy is about sharing, not imperialism

The relationship between two countries is similar to the relationship between two people. Emotion is a key methodology in cultural diplomacy, whereas in other fields it can be seen as a weakness. The aim is to give people around you a desire to know you better.

There used to be a lot of cultural imperialism in cultural diplomacy, but this is exactly what we should avoid. We can't act the way we did 40 years ago. When you simply bring your culture over to a country, without sharing points of view or inviting the views of your hosts, you invite simplistic comparison, without the richness of collaboration. Today, cultural diplomacy can give an idea of a country's way of engaging with others, of its capacity to share and to accept other points of view.

France has particular expertise in the arts to share. In 1958, we were the first country to have a Ministry of Culture. We built national networks of theaters in the 1970s and 1980s as well as choreographic centers and arts centers which you can find in every region of France. Our network is very efficient in terms of audiences, unlike some countries where cultural life is focused on the capital. Internationally, our cultural diplomacy started at the end of the 19th century – it is in our blood.

While France can be proud of its system of cultural networks, in my work as a cultural attaché I have learnt that there other ways to organize. In the US, for example, culture is not organized by the state.

When I came to the UK, I felt that the visual arts scene was ahead of France. But rather than trying to prove the opposite, I wanted to create a scenario in which French and British artists and professionals could share their differences, and avoid any comparison. Over a three-year period, a season called *Paris Calling* was created in London.

British and French curators built *Paris Calling* together. They shared an international perspective; of 120 participating artists, perhaps 40 were based in France. Thirty exhibitions were staged in a huge variety of venues, from small commercial galleries to huge public institutions. Where previously it had been quite rare to find coverage of French culture in the British media, *Paris Calling* generated 80 positive articles and reviews. The following year, more than 25 exhibitions of French artists took place in London – the contacts had been maintained.

I plan to create a similar project over the next three years in New York. Again, this is not about bringing French artists to the US, but about sharing points of view between American and French curators on international art, not just French and American art. Artists consider themselves international, rather than defined by nation.

Its success will be when contributors on both sides are attracted not just to join the project but to build it.

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Having started her career at the Pompidou Center in Paris, from 2003 to 2008 **Sophie Claudel** worked as a Cultural Attaché at the French Embassy in London, where she created and ran major Franco-British arts projects including *France Moves* and *Paris Calling*. From 2008 to 2010 she worked as an arts consultant in London, and has recently joined the French Embassy in New York where she is heading up the Arts Department.

5. Works by 20th century artists such as Andy Warhol are also included in *The Art of the Enlightenment* exhibition. Warhol's self-portraiture harks back to a European tradition in which the artist depicts himself as the unwilling object. *Self-Portrait*, Andy Warhol, 1967  
 © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/Artists Rights Society, New York, 2011. Photograph: Bruno Hartinger



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6. *Portrait of Heinrike Dannecker* by Gottlieb Schick, 1802, which appears in *The Art of the Enlightenment* exhibition in Beijing, portrays a young woman wearing the colours of the French Revolution, promising a break with old traditions.  
 © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photograph: Jörg P Anders



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aim of the collaboration was clear: the use of culture as a means of nurturing understanding and goodwill, and perhaps, to encourage a kind of dialogue that may not otherwise happen.

### Festivals and expos

We cannot consider cultural diplomacy without mentioning global expo-style events such as the Venice Biennale. These represent quintessentially 19th and 20th century modes of engagement. The format, with nations setting up their booths and exhibiting trophy artists and work, seems almost quaint in today's world of instantaneous communication. Yet the enduring attraction of these global events tells us something about the power of human networks that converge around a particular area of endeavor. They are the cultural equivalents of the Olympics.

There is a sense of occasion about these events that has not yet been successfully translated into the virtual realm. From the Cannes Film Festival to the Frankfurt Book

Fair to Art Basel's annual fairs in Switzerland and the US, the world appears to need such moments of communion. Fragmentation and globalization create a need to periodically bring people together in a single place and time for a unified experience – to make sense of it all.

### Impact

This leads us to the question of impact. Beyond fanfare and symbolism, what can cultural diplomacy actually achieve? It is tempting to paraphrase American department store magnate John Wanamaker's famous quip about advertising, namely that he knew half the money he spent on it was wasted, but he didn't know which half. Yet, even if the direct impact of soft power is rather difficult to measure – as tends to be true for most cultural fields – it is undeniable and real. In a world where we are becoming ever more interdependent, building relationships based on a commonality of values and interests is of benefit not just for the cultural sector, but for the steady flow of global commerce and politics.

An extraordinary recent display of cultural diplomacy was broadcast to television audiences worldwide when the New York Philharmonic Orchestra undertook a tour to Pyongyang, the North Korean capital. It was a moment of connection between two nations that could not be more antagonistic. While the impact of such an event is almost impossible to gauge with crisp evaluation metrics, one can easily imagine a narrative where the ice begins to crack, opening the door to more broad-based economic exchanges, followed by the reassessing of political relations. Of course, all this well-meaning diplomacy can be undone instantly by thoughtless expressions of hard power.

### Opportunities

To fully exploit its potential, cultural diplomacy and exchange could benefit from new 21st century support systems. In my opinion, there are tremendous opportunities for two sectors here in particular: one is US-style philanthropy, the other consists of corporations acting in the role of cultural sponsors. ➤

Bose Krishnamachari & Riyas Komu  
Artistic Directors of Kochi-Muziris Biennale

## Artists can harness culture to revive historic international relationships

The ancient port of Muziris in the south Indian state of Kerala was the landing point for Judaism, Christianity, Islam and a host of world cultures. It was the port of call for western Asia, the Mediterranean and East Africa, and the Far East, including China. Nearby Kochi was the center of the Indian spice trade for several centuries, and was known to the Greeks, Romans, Jews, Arabs and Chinese since ancient times. The new Kochi-Muziris Biennale festival, which will take place in late 2012, is the first of its kind to be held in India, and will celebrate the region's history as a place where differing cultures meet.

It will be a very international event. We will gather art from different parts of the world, and also bring

a global audience to a large-scale platform for Indian contemporary art. India's cross-border cultural influences already include language, literature, music, dance, cuisine, fashion, cinema and sport. With the Kochi-Muziris Biennale we intend to establish the place of visual arts high on this list.

We plan to make Kochi a meeting place for art and artists from across the world, from Asia and Latin America, as well as Europe and the US. This confluence of art from different regions will generate an international dialogue on the relevance, recurrence and making of art in a globalized world. As one critic has put it, this biennale "not only embodies, but actively propagandizes the virtues of globalization."

The Indian government is supporting the project with funding to establish its infrastructure, and the Kochi Biennale Foundation has on its board representatives from various government bodies. They know that by hosting this biennale, we will present Kochi as an aspiring global city. International visitors will experience one

of the most spectacular and large-scale art events ever to be mounted in India and witness an unprecedented coming together of international and national artists. But at the same time they will be invited to engage with the remarkable backdrop of the region's landscape, history, politics and culture.

We expect the event to attract both short-term and long-term investment – we are currently reaching out to partners and sponsors – and see it as a way to make our mark on the international scene in competition with other cities. More long-term, Kochi and the state of Kerala will be groomed to become a truly international cultural destination.

The **Kochi-Muziris Biennale** will take place in late 2012, and will be India's first international festival of contemporary visual arts and the largest public art event ever held in the country. Programmed by artists Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu, it will include film, installation, painting, sculpture, new media and performance art. [www.kochimuzirisbiennale.org](http://www.kochimuzirisbiennale.org)



7. Riyas Komu pictured with his work *Left Leg* (2008)  
Komu lives and works in Mumbai and Kerala. His work has been exhibited in India and overseas, including the Venice Biennale in 2007, which featured pieces that focused on the political and cultural history of Kerala.



8. Bose Krishnamachari pictured with his work *Ghost: Transmemoir*  
Krishnamachari lives and works in Mumbai and his work has been exhibited in galleries around the world. He was guest curator at the Indian pavilion of ARCO-Madrid 2009. In the same year he created Gallery BMB in South Mumbai, with a vision to bring the best national and international art to India.

9. Restoration work on the temples at Angkor in Cambodia has drawn on expertise from Japan, France and the US. In 2004 UNESCO removed the site from its World Heritage in Danger list.  
Photograph: ©UNESCO/Francesco Bandarin



Philanthropy is one of America's greatest cultural exports. One might logically conclude that in a post 9/11 world, cultural exchange would be one of the great philanthropic opportunities of our time. After all, the retreat of the US government from this field left a vacuum for private philanthropy to fill. Unfortunately this hasn't happened.

As mentioned, the US philanthropic system remains, to an overwhelming extent, domestically focused. No wonder that much of the world knows America through its popular music and movies, which are aggressively promoted by globally minded corporations. However, this also means that cultural exchange is an area where one of the 1,200 billionaires that one reads about in *Forbes* magazine could, with relatively modest investment, quickly become a significant player. An allocation of \$5m a year would arguably create the largest foundation program in cultural exchange in America. Multiplier effects through partnerships, matching grants, and inspiration to other funders would dramatically broaden the impact of this yet-to-be identified benefactor.

Turning to companies, it is especially important to note the role of high-tech and media industries – beyond music companies and film studios – which are in some ways shaping the cultural image and message of countries far more intensively than traditional high culture

institutions do. A man or woman on the streets of Delhi or Moscow or Shanghai is more likely to know about the iPad, or Microsoft Word, or Facebook, than the Alvin Ailey dance company or a traveling exhibit of work by Cindy Sherman. Many non-cultural organizations increasingly find themselves in a position where their core activities significantly play into this larger cultural flow. Consequently, they have a material interest in reaching beyond borders and promoting cultural dialogue worldwide. Such companies might discover in cultural exchange a natural opportunity to serve as partners to government and arts organizations.

### Conclusions

In a recent debate in New York, someone in the audience asked an important question: Why is it that when we talk about cultural diplomacy, we ask what the cultural sector can do to help advance national interests, whereas when it comes to most other sectors, for example the auto industry or the software industry, we ask what the government is willing to do to promote that sector abroad? Who is supposed to be supporting whose interests?

It's a valid question, and it points to an important caveat about cultural diplomacy. When these linkages happen between governments and the arts, the autonomous goals of the cultural institutions must be respected. They should not in any way be seen as merely doing the work of governments. Tact and maturity is required to work these relationships. When they are done right, everyone gains.

Even so, cultural diplomacy is not without its skeptics. Political and economic calamities can overshadow cultural interactions, setting countries back months or years on the road to building better relationships. People convinced about the potential of cultural diplomacy are not so naïve as to believe that it can paper over the actions of repressive rulers or fiscally and environmentally irresponsible governments. In times of epic turbulence, cultural relations cannot take precedence over people's most urgent and basic needs.

Yet even amidst the most disturbing crises, eventually a moment comes for rebuilding and reopening a society, and this next phase will

always find culture in the foreground. The temples of Angkor in Cambodia, for example, have been restored with the assistance of various countries – Japan, France, the US – each reflecting their own particular mechanisms and attitudes about what that work consists of. The story was part of the renewed acceptance of Cambodia after a period of international isolation.

As new practices of cultural diplomacy arise, it is an undeniably positive development that the arts are operating on an international scale. There remains enormous potential in the use of culture to build more peaceful and enduring relations between countries. 🌍

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Brunswick Arts was set up in 2001 to provide strategic communications advice to arts organizations, corporates, charities and the not-for-profit sector. It has teams in London, Basel, Berlin, Paris, Stockholm, Beijing, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and New York.



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Next year, Brunswick is supporting *UK Now*, one of the biggest celebrations of British culture to be held in China, highlighting the best of British arts and creativity and the breadth of cultural engagement between the UK and China. Following the success of *China Now* in 2008, which showcased Chinese culture and was held in London to coincide with the Beijing Olympics, *UK Now* will run for six months around the London 2012 Olympic Games events. The program will be managed by the British Council in partnership with HSBC and Brunswick. If you would like to find out more, or be involved, please contact: [leigh.gibson@britishcouncil.org](mailto:leigh.gibson@britishcouncil.org)

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